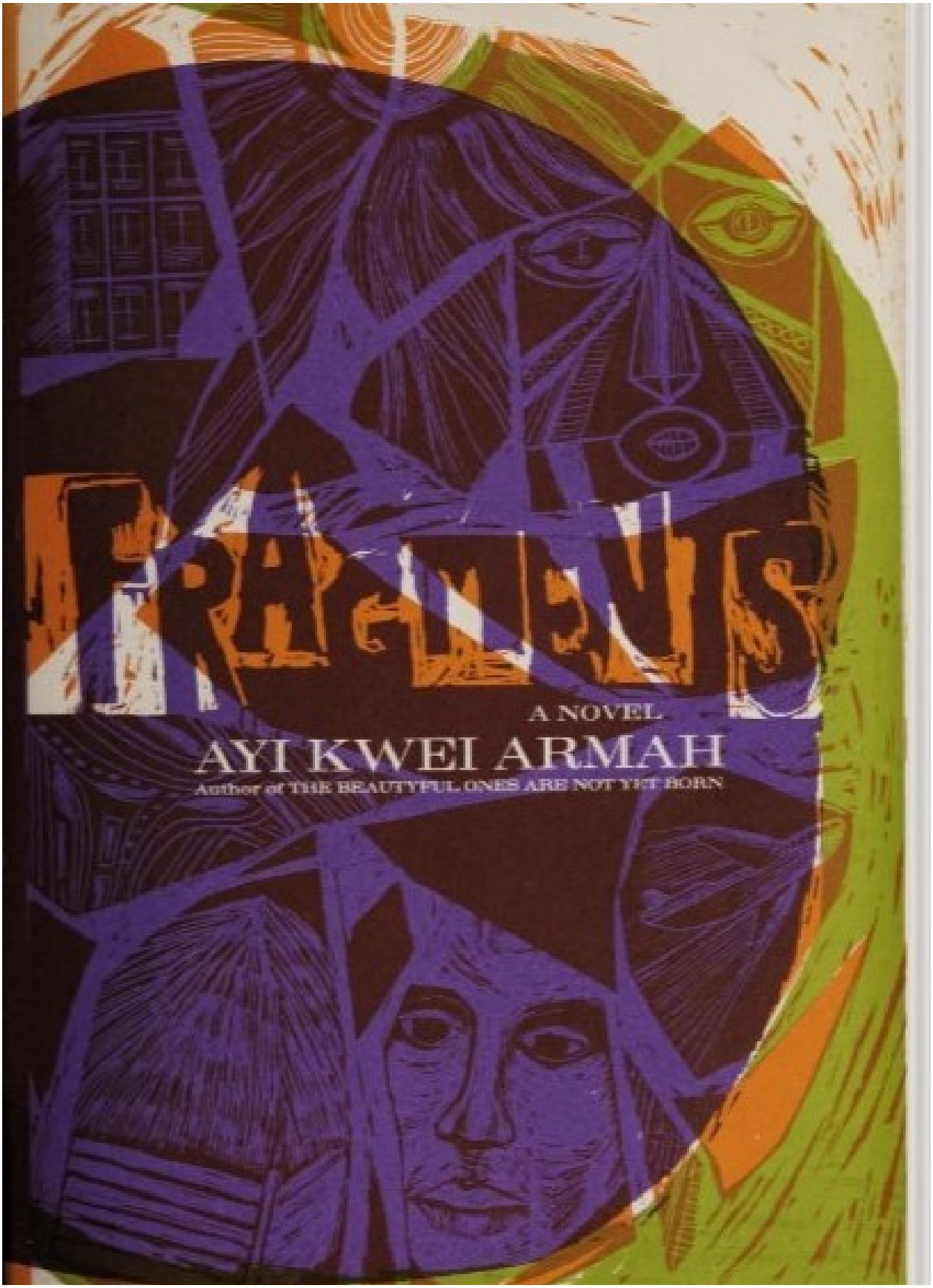
FRAGMENTS
A NOVEL
AYI KWEI ARMAH
Author of THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN

$5.95

FRAGMENTS

AYI KWEI ARMAH

Ayi Kwei Armah's first novel, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, was published in August, 1968. *Time* Magazine called the author "an artist right to his sizzling nerve ends." The *New York Times* called his book "a rarity not only in the first rank of African novels . . . but perhaps in the first rank of recent novels anywhere."

His second novel takes its major theme from the shattered spiritual vision versus the grotesque material expectations of Africa today. The larger vision in *Fragments* belongs mainly to three characters:

NAANA — an old woman grown completely blind, whose shut-in mind disturbs her with recurrent dreams of an Africa not so eager to destroy itself in the chase after things — a better, more spiritual community.

BAAKO — her grandson, a young artist just back from a foreign university, hoping to do useful creative work in a society increasingly reluctant to recognize beauty in anything other than material riches and power.

JUANA — a Puerto Rican woman psychiatrist working in West Africa, for whom the place is another station in a quest for purpose.

These three share a pagan vision of life, whose aim lies not in the successful individual's lonely scramble to the top of a society in diseased pain, but in the purification of the poisoned environment itself.

The vision is out of joint, of course. For the whole society — and most emphati-

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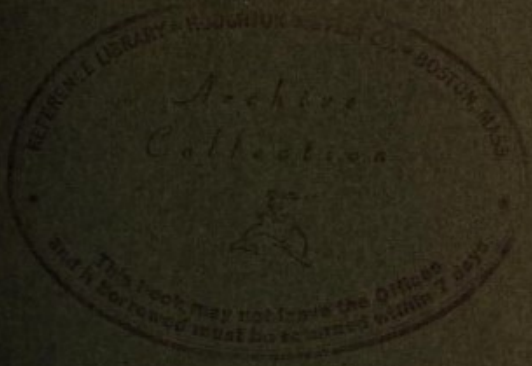
Fragments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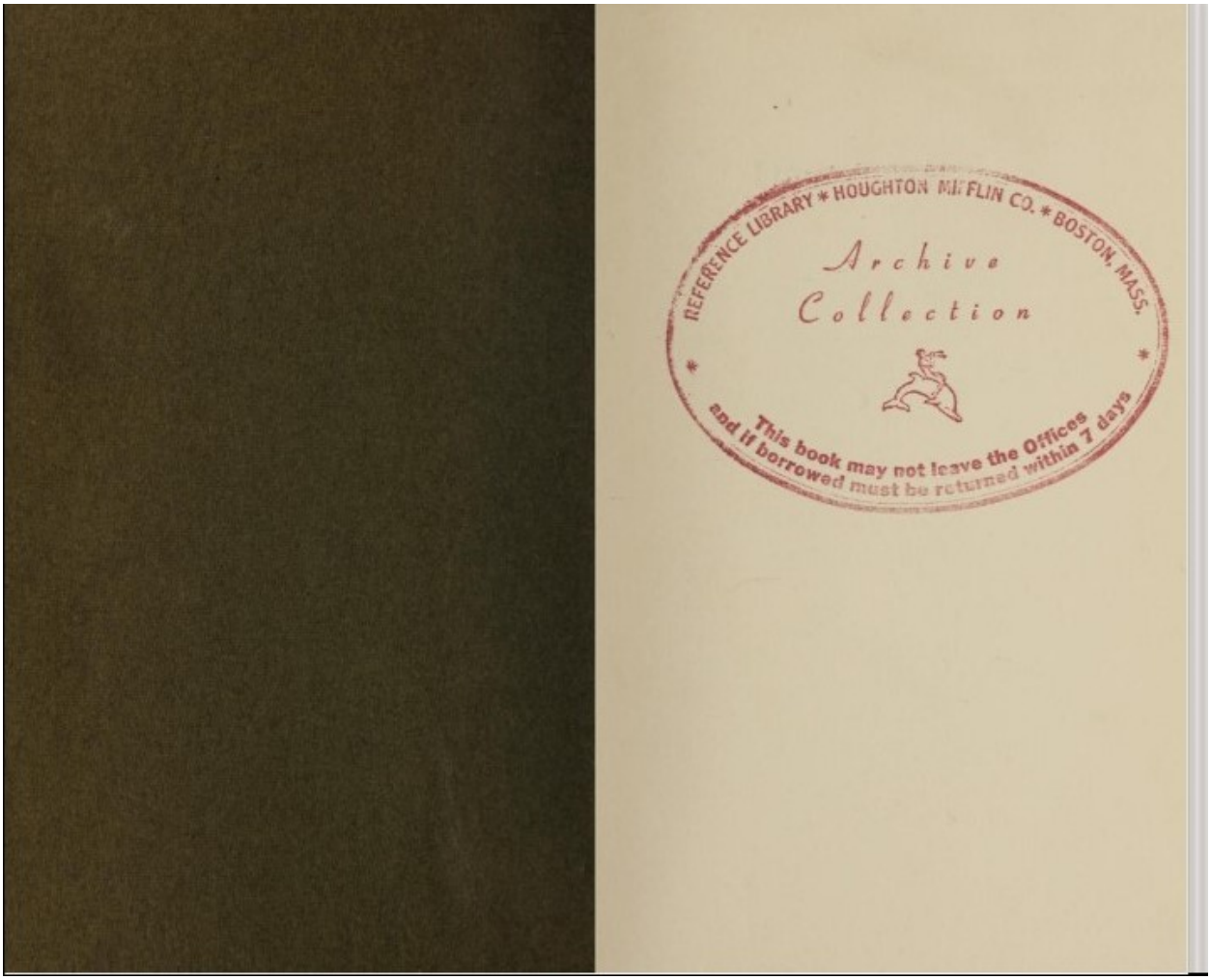
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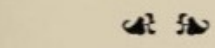
By Ayi Kwei Armah

The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born

Fragments

Ayi Kwei Armah

Fragments



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& ANA LIVIA

Fragments

1 : Naana

EACH THING that goes away returns and nothing in the end is lost. The great friend throws all things apart and brings all things together again. That is the way everything goes and turns round. That is how all living things come back after long absences, and in the whole great world all things are living things. All that goes returns. He will return.

How can I not know it when all my years I have watched the sun go down times unending toward the night only to come again from the dawn the opposite way? Too true, it is so long since last I saw the sun, going or coming. But my skin continues still to tell the heat from the cold, and I know it is I who have changed, not the changing circle of the world itself. And yet even here things have come about lately to put into me more fearful doubts than my tired soul can hold. Have two nights passed? Or is it two whole weeks that have passed me by?

I had moved myself into the middle of the yard, and sitting by the stairs where they begin I had spent forgetful time

Perhaps in years alone Baako himself is a child no more. But what is a traveler just returned from far journeys started years ago if not a new one all again?

And Araba too. I have heard of the dreams she has had to welcome her returning brother. Yet who am I to throw sour words against the dreams of the eager sister and the eager mother? I too have had my dreams of his return, and they too have been filled with things to give rest to tired flesh, heavy things, things of heavy earth. I have also dreamed of riches and greatness for Baako, and they were not for him alone. I have known that if riches and greatness should ever cross his path and walk with him to the end of his days, and if in this slippery place he should one day find firm standing for his tired young soles, I am not one he will choose to forget.

Everyone who goes returns. He will come. He will be changed, but we shall welcome him as the same. That is the circle. There has been a lot of cruelty done, but nothing has been done so grave that in this case the circle should be broken. Nothing was left out before he was taken up into the sky to cross the sea and to go past the untouchable horizon itself. I watched everything that night, and I am weak, but with the little strength that I still had in me I would myself have stopped the drunken Foli if he had gone wrong anywhere, adding things unknown to those gone before, or leaving out any of the words and actions they have

left us to guide us on the circular way. Nothing at all was left out. The uncle called upon the nephew the protection of the old ones gone before. The circle was not broken. The departed one will return.

His uncle Foli has always been one to have a spirit flawed by the heaviness of flesh too often listened to. But that night his words had a perfect completeness that surprised me and told me the departed ones are still watching over those they left here above. Even Foli felt their presence. His soul within those hours left the heavy body so as to be with the departed ones, to ask their help upon the head of the one about to go. Nothing was said then that was not to be said, and nothing remained unsaid for which there was a need.

> Where you are going,
> go softly.
> Nananom,
> you who have gone before,
> see that his body does not lead him
> into snares made for the death of spirits.
> You who are going now,
> do not let your mind become persuaded
> that you walk alone.
> There are no humans born alone.
> You are a piece of us,
> of those gone before
> and who will come again.
> A piece of us, go
> and come a piece of us.
> You will not be coming,
> when you come,
> the way you went away.

bathing in warmth of such surpassing sweetness that I was sure I was beginning even now to see the sun again. And then they came and broke my peace, saying I had been sitting out there in the cold for hours. Surprised and angry that they were moving me another time, I was sharpening words to tell them I had only come to take in this heat of the sun, till one of them, was it Ekua? said in her gentle voice words that touched my soul with fear.

Night fell long ago, Naana.

I was amazed. I was going to tell her she was wrong, that I had surely felt the sun touch my skin and leave its warmth on it, but then I thought again and thinking made me hold my peace.

I am a person no more, unable to help myself. What is still left of my bones and of the flesh that clings to it would make a small enough burden for any head, but for *them* it has too long been an annoying burden. I am old and of no use to anyone, but I am a mouth that continues to eat pepper and taste salt. I am such a mouth, joined to an end that runs with waste, spending others' love that has long since disappeared. Is that not enough? Or should I go and add to this a spray of words against the angry face of everyone? Only the strong ones can fail to be understood and still survive, and I am of no use to anyone. If I should see a thing which all around me think they do not see, why will I in my foolishness shout against all the strength of their unseeing eyes? The witches saw things denied to others; beyond that

they talked of what it was they had seen, and were destroyed. It is a long time since I heard of any witch thrown out of her secrecy, but souls are broken all the same. If I see things unseen by those who have eyes, why should my wisest speech not be silence?

One thing I will continue to tell them over and over again: he will return. They who have their eyes with them still but are nonetheless the shadowy ones, they will not have the hardness to destroy me for knowing that, because it is a knowledge close to their souls also, though they know it only as a wish, and it is almost a stranger to them. Their wishes are the closest thing they have to the beauty of long peaceful dreams, and in their wishing they too want this return. The things they want it for, the wishes below — those are other things to load my soul with fear.

There have been some dreams abroad, and I am afraid. There should be dreams before returns, as before goings, before everything. That is only just. But these have been woven of such heavy earth that they will load his spirit down and after they have touched him it will never fly again.

Two such dreams I have heard from the mouth of Efua herself. Oh great friend, a human mother should not have such dreams against the coming of her own flesh and her loved one's soul. Even cats have learned to turn the hunger for the newly born against their own entrails.

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> and who will come again.
> A piece of us, go
> and come a piece of us.
> You will not be coming,
> when you come,
> the way you went away.

You will come stronger,
to make us stronger,
wiser,
to guide us with your wisdom.
Gain much from this going.
Gain the wisdom
to turn your back on the wisdom
of Ananse.
Do not be persuaded you will fill your stomach faster
if you do not have others' to fill.
There are no humans who walk this earth alone.

But that there was such hot desire impatient at his departure for his return, that I did not see. So much else around me drew my spirit into that night. And the words took me away into a past that filled me with satisfaction because everything in it was full of understanding. After the words, there were sounds that rose before me as if all this crowded present had never come at all, and days and years already gone had come again to live with us, their sounds bringing clearness out of dim forgotten nights. Not even Foli's voice, used so often for deceit, could scrape the peace and understanding off those ancient words.

A human being alone
is a thing more sad than any lost animal
and nothing destroys the soul
like its aloneness.

Only after those words did Foli think to begin pouring out the schnapps he had been holding in those hands of his which hate so much to let hot drink escape. He had kept the spirits waiting like begging children for the drink of their own

libation and, thirsty drunkard that he has always been, even when at last he began to pour it out he only let go of little miserly drops, far from enough to end the long thirst of a single one of those gone before. I could see his eyes, with a lot of the drunken white showing underneath, and the black of them stuck almost to their upper lids. Slyly like a thief he was measuring the bottle in his soul. The less he poured out to end the thirst of the ghosts the more the bottom would hold for his own dry mouth. And yet this man with his shriveled soul found all the words to speed Baako into alien worlds and to protect him there. Perfect words, with nothing missing and nothing added that should not have been there. It was dark, but the light from behind us came to us in the doorway and caught the miserly drink as it fell, making each drop disappear a shiny bead.

The unbelievable thing was that outside there was movement in all this stillness. Lights came casting giant leaf shadows upon the walls inside from cars returning, lights that moved up and down and across before dying with the passing of the cars. They reminded me then of the moving shadows and lights I had seen many years and nights ago, when the cinema lorry used to come. One car even blew its horn, the blower not knowing that so close to him there were humans talking to the spirits gone before, even if there was only the drunkard Foli to speak in the name of those yet to go.

Always
there has been a danger in such departures.
Much of our blood has run to waste

yet we will not speak of ways
to stop the coming and the going
for we are not mad with the sorrow of moments that pass.
Always
the danger of death,
the death of the body,
death of the soul
alone on seas that know no ending,
hanging in the endless sky
alone beyond all horizons
where our highest hills are themselves too small,
alone in the opposite lands,
lands of the ghosts,
alone in white men's lands.

There are dangers in this life
but fathers,
do not fill your grandson here with fears.
The danger of death we have with us
around us everywhere at home.
It is the promise of those gone before.
Let him hear that.
Let him not forget its truth
and give him courage to understand it.
Watch over him, fathers.
Watch over him
and let him prosper
there where he is going.
And when he returns
let his return, like rain,
bring us your blessings and their fruits,
your blessings
your help
in this life you have left us to fight alone.
With your wisdom

let him go,
let him come.
And you, traveler about to go,
Go and return,
Go, come.

Even coming from a man himself so blemished, they were perfect words. I looked at Baako. He had the smile of the young on his face. For him all this was something from another place, and he was impatient like a child to see it end. He would spend the night hanging in the sky, he had told me that before, and already his eyes were filled with an eagerness to go.

The pig Foli, in spite of the beauty of the words he had spoken, remained inside his soul a lying pig. A shameful lot more than a whole half bottle of the drink had remained unpoured, and now he went and took from among his many shiny things a glass to pour the traveler's drink of ceremony for Baako. It was a very small glass he took, the shriveled soul, the better to keep what remained of the drink for his own parched throat. It makes me weaker still, to think how many times the softness and the greed of our bodies makes us wish we could continue to cheat those who have gone before and even those coming after us. And then what was most amazing, the glass itself was not a hollow glass at all, but a special thing made to deceive the seeing eye, with a bottom thick and solid almost halfway to the top, so that only a very shallow bowl, almost flat, was left to hold the drink. Into this Foli poured the schnapps for his own nephew Baako. All the time his eyes were sharpened to see that not one more

drop escaped to give peace to the unsatisfied tongues of the ancestors he had already cheated. His filthy ears must have heard something from the spirits even then, because with no one having mentioned his drunken gluttony he sought to give saving reasons for himself, saying,

"We must not make him drunk. He is young, and he will be traveling in the night."

As for Baako himself it seemed even the little he was given was too much for his tongue. I saw tears in his eyes a moment after he put that amazing glass to his lips, and afterward he seemed glad there had been no more of the spirit in it for him to drink. I looked from the young man to his uncle, and then my blood was poisoned with the fear of what would happen if Foli's greed for drink was allowed to break the circle and to spoil all the perfect beauty of the libation. And Foli, he had turned his back with the rolls of skin on it, and he was preparing to take himself a glass with no false cheating bottom and to pour his blind soul a full drink of the spirit. There was nothing other for me to do. I waited till he had drawn the glass. It was a big one. Then I said,

"It is your mind to pour me out a drink in that, Foli."

Over his face there came that anger which shame so swiftly changes to a generous smile.

"But Naana, is it good for you also to drink?"

"We give our ghosts to drink, or am I a liar? And what is an old woman but the pregnancy that will make another ghost?"

"It is so strong, you know, schnapps."

"Yes, Foli. And is it you now telling me the weak ones have no need of what is strong?"

"Ahh, Naana." He sighed, but there was nothing he could do. He looked at the bottle in his hand, and I could see his stomach sink with thinking how the drink was going down. Then he smiled and held out the glass to me. I took it. With a very white smile he began to pour, fearfully and slowly, like a man forced to shed the blood of his own grandmother, and he was telling me,

"I will leave it up to you to tell me when to stop."

I did not let him use my own shame against me. I looked into his face and I also smiled a false smile to answer his, and continued to hold his eyes with mine as he poured the drink.

"Tell me when to stop," he said again. The glass was only half full, the python.

I smiled, and looked at him. His pouring hand was now beginning to shake, but I let him pour until the glass was full, and even then I said nothing. He stopped himself. He was frowning now, not knowing what to say.

"Naana," he was beginning. I could hear him, but only like a voice from very far away. "Naana, are you going to drink all that yourself?"

Quietly I went past him into the doorway where he had stood offering libation to those gone before, and in the same place where he had let fall those miserly drops I poured down everything in the glass, and it was only after that that I opened my mouth again:

"Nananom, drink to your thirst, and go with the young one. Protect him well, and bring him back, to us, to you."

As I came back into the room Foli met me with words,

"But I poured . . ."

"It was not enough," I answered him. "I am not quarreling with you: it was not enough. You learned so well the words you spoke to the dead ones this night. Did no one also teach you the power of the anger of the departed? How did you forget, then? Or was the present growling of your belly a greater thing than Baako's going and the whole stream of his life after that? The spirits would have been angry, and they would have turned their anger against him. He would have been destroyed."

From speaking alone a tiredness came over me then as if many hands had beaten me each one gently but all together for long days on end. I fell on a soft long seat opposite the one Baako was sitting on, quietly watching what he could not yet have understood, and I slept because when I woke up there were many people and a terrible hurry all around me and a mad blowing of many horns from people's cars outside.

"Naana, you will come in my car. That is where Baako will be," Foli said. I had indeed asked to go the last miles with the departing one. There had been many things in me for him, but they were not things I could say, and so sitting close to him would be good. I was happy Foli had remembered, but I had not known it would be in his car, with him so full of drink already. But, as if he had caught my waking thoughts, he said quietly, so that I was ashamed,

"I will not be the one driving, Naana. The driver is here. It will not be long before we go."

The horns and the shouting stopped outside. Inside there was the sound of songs from another of Foli's shiny things. For a long time I listened and was lost, till I heard Foli shout to Baako and another friend, as if I were not there,

"Look at your grandmother, listening as if she can understand."

Before I could become angry I saw it was true. I had not understood a single word, and yet this was something I had not known before Foli spoke. Listening to the sounds, I had thought I knew what the words were saying also.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"Who?"

"The people singing. Those playing."

"Ah. Afro-Americans."

"Americans?"

"Yes," Foli said.

"It was as if I understood what they were saying."

Several people laughed and I felt like a child, not knowing what I had done to make them laugh like that.

"Their people were Africans." It was Baako who said this. Afraid to raise more laughter against myself, I shook my head with the perfect understanding that was not in it. I had not understood the words at all, but the sounds, above all the cries of the man who sang most of the beginnings, and the women's voices, many, many women's voices always there around him to catch his pain and make it into something almost sweet, that was all familiar to me somewhere. And also beneath it all the thing that went on always and would

not let me escape, heavy like a sound of doom, that also I knew.

The sounds were cut off suddenly in the middle of a long shout because everybody said it was time to go, but the sadness remained with me.

That night I saw more things to astonish me in this place and to make me feel how much I have become a stranger here, because these are things whose meaning I will never understand before the time of my going comes. In my mind also I walked across strange lands where I had never been before.

Sometimes I know my blindness was sent to me to save me from the madness that would surely have come with seeing so much that was not to be understood. Going with Baako to see him go, we went out of Foli's room and the many cars drove into the night, but soon there was no longer any night to see. Where the cars were passing, in the open streets themselves, not even in people's homes, there were lights so many and so strong that even I saw then the gap of a young breadseller's teeth, as if the night had never come — and she was not near, but safe beyond the road, on the gutter's other side. And yet no one thought to say anything: not Foli, and of the young ones none at all. So I kept my peace, but whenever I saw Baako's face in the corner I asked inside myself if it was possible that all of them were growing to be men thinking this was the world, and this the night.

I closed my eyes against the night that had disappeared outside, and I saw Baako roaming in unknown, forbidden places, just born there again after a departure and a death somewhere. He had arrived from beneath the horizon and standing in a large place that was open and filled with many winds, he was lonely. But suddenly he was not alone, but walking one among many people. All the people were white people all knowing only how to speak the white people's languages. Always, after saying anything, however small or large, they shook their white heads solemnly, as if they were the ones gone before. Some touched hands, slowly. But Baako walked among them neither touched nor seen, like a ghost in an overturned world in which all human flesh was white. And some of these people bore in their arms things of a beauty so great that I thought then in my soul this was the way the spirit land must be. Only it was a beauty that frightened also, and before I could remember again that he was not yet gone I had made in my fear a hurried asking for protection on Baako's head.

We did not go with him inside the airplane to see him go. We were not allowed to go with him, but parted company in a room large as Nyankom, Esuano and Patase all put together, and in this place also we had the amazing brightness all around us.

Then we went outside to a long white fence behind which we stood with others like us who had come to weep for a

departing one, and after a long time we saw the line of people, many white people but also others who were black, go like gentle ghosts into the airplane. When it swallowed Baako in his turn, I could look no more. I did not turn to see it as it began to go into the air, though Foli was by me telling me to look, because like a child he saw only beauty in the going of the thing. The heavy sound made me fear for Baako. But I remembered how perfect the words had been for his departure and his protection, and I was happy inside myself that I had taken the drink from Foli and given the ancestors their need. The circle was not broken in any place.

They will protect him. How can it then be said that he will not come?

2 : Edin

It was not just in the mind, this need for flight. It was also in the body, possessingly physical, a need she had begun to feel with an intensity that increased steadily with the passage of this time, a need after a morning's work at the hospital, to go, just go as far out as she could and leave behind her the clinic buildings with their modern façades that were the only modern things about them, to leave the rows of barracks with their green windows, the only things the nurses had for quarters, to leave the whole aborted town just to get out and keep going in the attempt, however doomed, to forget that now the sum of her life was only that she was here in another defeated and defeating place, to forget all the reminders of futility.

As she came out and closed the consultation room door behind her, the duty nurse got up from her chair and came over to her, touching her starched white and green cap in a gesture that could have been taken for a salute had it not been so feminine. The nurse came forward with a certain languorous swing to her walk. She was smiling, showing the

beauty of her white, even teeth, but there was also a genuine inward joy.

"I'll be coming back late this afternoon," Juana said. "Take only a few people on the waiting list. No one earlier than three-thirty."

"Yes, Doctor," the nurse said. Her right hand had descended to the lapel of her green uniform, picking at something invisible, and she was still smiling as Juana took her keys out of her left pocket and walked down the length of the corridor and out into the sun, to the parking lot.

"You saw a lot of patients this morning, Doctor."

"Yes, Patience. And you, you must be tired too."

"We here are more used to it, all this."

Juana sensed the unavoidable estrangement, the politeness of distances created for strangers like herself, no matter how close they tried to come, and she was glad the nurse did not continue. She had not been aware the other was following her. In the shade of the trees where she had parked the car mango leaves had fallen onto the hood and one which had not lost its greenness had also dropped and gotten caught between the windshield and the left wiper. As she removed the leaf she turned to the nurse and asked her: "Do you need a ride some place?"

"Yes, please, Doctor."

There was a time, in the beginning, when she had tried to melt all this formality by having the nurses drop the title and call her by her name. But she had only succeeded in embarrassing them, and in many wordless, polite ways they had made her understand that it was strange and threatening to them, this need of hers to have them desert a familiar reality

in which there was the respected Doctor and Senior Nurses and Senior Assistant Nurses and Junior Nurses and little Nurses in Training, and the titles meant a world into which they had struggled and were still struggling to fit their own lives. With the coming of this understanding she had given up, though often she still found herself needing to reassure herself that some day the deadly seriousness people here invested in these external things, from the titles to the dozens of graded types of uniform, would crack and let some kind of sense of inner worth come between herself and those she walked among, so that there could be the human touching the hunger for which continued in her in spite of everything.

"Which way are you going?"

"It's near the Texaco petrol dump, after the Korle crossing, Doctor."

Normally she would have turned right on leaving the hospital grounds, and less than a mile later the town would have vanished behind her, and all she would have seen would have been the hard dry bush struggling to grow out of the salted-over lagoon earth, an occasional village hidden behind palm branches, and the growing number of new houses with signs outside them saying there was a faith healer living there. But now, when the gleaming infant wing had been left behind, she turned left along the road leading into Accra, a road that used to be wide and free to drive along but had recently been made an awkward trap because someone at the City Council had decided it should be turned into a dual carriageway. All they had done was to run two low cement walls along its length from the hospital entrance to the Korle Lagoon, and the flowers planted between the walls in the

first days had very soon become dry brown dust because they were not watered after a while. She would first have to pass through the town she was escaping, and she made up her mind to go along the old shore road leading to the new harbor town at Tema.

Just before they reached the lagoon the air came blowing off it at a tangent and brought sharp whiffs into the car. The nurse giggled in a way that was at once happy and a bit embarrassed, and then she rolled up the window on her side all the way and took special care about locking the little side vent too. Juana looked at her and with some difficulty kept her smile from blowing up into full laughter as she also rolled up her window and closed the side vent.

After the crossing over the Korle Bu Bridge, when she saw the Texaco sign Juana shifted gears and had almost come to a stop when the nurse smiled apologetically and said she had really wanted to get down a little farther on but had found no way of explaining just then. Juana said nothing but drove slowly on until she came to the sign that said NEW TECHNICAL SECONDARY SCHOOL with the building that was to be the school still unfinished though the foundations had already been laid when she first came to this country.

"Here," the nurse said, but Juana had anticipated this suddenness and stopped smoothly, not going too close to the open gutter. The nurse stepped out and said what must have been her long thanks, but the rolled-up glass made it impossible for Juana to hear the words. She just nodded and started the car, reaching out to wave over the top of it.

Juana had come this way for the drive out before, several times, when after long days spent closed in, in the town and the hospital itself, all the boredom and the loneliness and a disgust she could not hold under in spite of all the power of her will, all this created inside her a feeling of attraction, a certain love for being out on the road. Several times, driving along it, letting herself go and pushing the little car to go faster and faster, she could reach back to a feeling that perhaps there would be some meaning waiting for her at the end of a long and aimless drive, that it wasn't true that every important thing that was worthwhile had run slowly out of her life. This need of hers for a periodic escape was in some ways a cure for her own long unease, this leaving Accra to come out for air, with the used portion of the day behind her lined with the wrecked minds it was her job to try and repair, and with the city itself behind her, made as if by some clever mind to produce exactly these wrecks that were her job and such an important, invading part of her own life now. She got angry driving through the town, even with her knowledge of the uselessness of her anger. She got angry whenever she tried to find what use there was in saving people who had found the mess she needed so often to flee from insupportable and had somehow flipped out of it after too much pain too long endured, only to give them the outer toughening they would need so they could be flipped back to get messed up some more in this town that could break any spirit. And then she would catch herself with the knowledge that it was not just the town, that in fact the town was not

the worst place. She had been into the countryside and there seen a kind of destruction that made people look to the grinding town as if some salvation could be found there. In the countryside things were worse. So the root of the trouble was deeper.

All the way through James Town, past the prison fort and down the loop past the Post Office, the afternoon traffic had been slow and difficult, and she had not remembered to roll the windows down. It was long after the lagoon had been left behind, after the Post Office where the new Barclay's Bank had gone up on the left opposite the neglected old church just off the shore to the right, and a newer, bigger Standard Bank was rising out in front, that she felt free to roll down both windows all the way. The air that came in was hot and moist with life, and past the silence of Parliament House there was the policeman with his unchanging, incredible happiness and skill directing the traffic just then to a complete stop. The sound of the sea to the right came over with a complete quietness that filled the ear like something made entirely for it, and then in all that heat and wet and peace the happy policeman turned and instead of an arm movement he just winked at her and smiled, and from habit she knew it was his way of telling her her time had come to move. From neutral to first the clutch did not stick at all, amazing thing. The forward move was smooth, and as she touched the rearview mirror, not because it needed adjusting but because she felt the desire to stroke a small itch at the tip of her wedding finger and also to get the sheer feel of the mirror's edge, she could see the policeman telling all those

engines with their drivers caught behind them what to do, and she saw that to direct the traffic from behind he seldom needed actually to look behind him, as if he could tell exactly where every vehicle was just from the sounds and the throbbing pulses reaching him there in the center of the road.

Now there was peace in her mind and body and it stayed all along the road past the FREEDOM AND JUSTICE arch monument so that this time she did not think how troubling these words were to a mind that had sought to know what they should mean, how troubling they were in this place. Past the Stadium with the sad and happy football crowds all gone this day, she went left and then dangerously right where the corner was crazy because it had been made that way, and through Christiansborg she slowed down for the many people living there in small spaces and appearing suddenly on the road from behind houses and walls lining it. But she had not intended to stop completely in front of the KALIFONIA MOONBEAM CAFE.

Yet any movement was now impossible. Behind, the line of cars following hers made retreat impossible, and the road forward was at this moment taken. Not by the debris of an accident, not a traffic accident, but by a group of men in government khaki shorts tending with a slow but intense inevitability toward the formation of a circle right there in the road. A few were in singlets but most had bare backs black and glistening with beads of sweat so clear this afternoon they kept the sun's light caught on the men's backs even after they broke and slipped gently down to get absorbed in the lining under government khaki. But the gentle-

ness of the falling of the sweat came out of the harshness of the circle these men were forming, and the concerted strength that filled their beautiful muscles now was born of an immediate and brutal necessity, for Juana saw there, as she looked and followed the line of each man's gaze and the focused tension of the violence no longer hidden in these men's bodies, a shivering dog in the middle of the road. On this hot Atlantic day there was something inside the dog making him so cold he seemed to be searching for the whole feel of the road's warm tar under him, and he was turning round and round in circles trying to reach and touch the tar with every bit of skin he had all in one impossible movement his limbs and bones were not soft enough to give him.

The pain of the dog and all that human tension around him should have made the place loud with noise but there was such a deep quiet even the frightened softness of a small voice begging with a hopeless sound from a child's throat was clearly audible like thin drops falling on hard rock in a desert hot for miles and miles all round. Juana heard the sounds but there was no certainty about their meaning until she asked a woman standing by with her hair not done and her cloth only knotted over her breasts and many signs of hurry in her appearance that said clearly that she had rushed out with sudden speed following the pull of some strange or terrible expectation. The woman spoke a kind of English that was mostly American in sound, and her words were mixed freely with Hausa and Ga and maybe some Fanti words, but the whole stream was clear to Juana in the end, and what she heard was that the child was saying the dog belonged to him and was his best friend in the world, that

he had never bitten anyone and was never ever going to bite people and he wasn't a mad dog, only that he was suffering and shivering with coldness because perhaps he had swallowed something bad that he couldn't vomit yet, that he was only a cold dog and would just lie down and soon be warm again if all these strange strong men would leave him alone with his friend.

But apart from the woman with her hair all wild no one else had listened to the meaning of the pleading sounds coming from the child, and the boy, with his mouth pushed awkward in the despair of his fearful begging, suddenly tried to break through the circle of men and reach his dog. The dog was settling for lying on the warm tar with only part of his body, but he was trying to make it his back that touched the warmth and he just couldn't. It seemed he looked in the direction of his friend the boy, but just then he must have seen past something ultimate that burned all hope in him. For one of the men moving in on the dog saw sudden danger in the boy's approach and caught the small frame with all the tension of a grown man's own deep fear and anger, and the child fell from the backward throw with his back scraping the tar at the side of the road where it was covered with browned sand blown off the deep black center tracks by traffic that had gone. The fallen boy made no sound but just lay there. Away from him the circle of men tightened with slow tension around the dog alone. There was no visible hurry on the part of any single man among them to get close to the dog, but the male desire to be the first made all those backs wet with sweat twitch now and then with their own impatient inward heat.

There were . . . how many men? Impossible to tell with any truth, except that they were a lot of men around just one dying dog, and a fear could be seen in them whose strength was strange, seeing that the source of it was such a powerless thing. They had several weapons in their hands, these men. The farthest over was a man with a long head and in his hand he held a cutlass that had in all that sunlight two parts that met along a clear line: the iron back of the weapon was blackened with the safe weathering touch of succeeding rains and drynesses; the twin front end glinted with a beautiful, cruel and even delicate steel whiteness as the man swung and shook the whole cutlass, trembling with anticipatory happiness or fear, it was impossible to tell. The next man it seemed had come dreaming straight from some last night's cinema show at the DUNIA or the REGAL or maybe some place far away at the other end of town like the ORBIT. What this dreamer had for a weapon against the suffering dog was a wooden toy molded in the shape of a pistol and painted a luminous color that fascinated the eye in the shining light. And this man too, in his own dreamy state, was in competition with the others to be the first killer of the dog. He had long hairy legs and even when he tried to frown most fiercely at the shivering dog his mouth betrayed him with something close to sympathy perhaps: a look that was funny and sly and still remained as serious as the muteness on the mouth of the dog himself.

Then there was a man with a torn singlet that had grown brown and through which his belly pushed into the open world, and it was not a small belly. He had a pitchfork held in both hands one middle tooth of which was broken where

it should have started, and the black and the white of his eyes shone intensely with a devouring desire to fix the dog lying there. There were others, but they stood out from the human rest neither in any great personal peculiarity nor in any markedly higher boldness in the way in which they intended to murder their victim dog.

Except one. He was a short man, with something swollen and out of shape about his shortness, so that the eye on first seeing him searched unordered for some twisting cause, for something perhaps like a hump upon his back. But there was nothing there to explain the twistedness, until the baffled eye descended and was struck in the region of the sweating man's loins with the sight of a scrotal sac so swollen that within the tattered pants containing it it had the look of a third and larger buttock winning a ruthless struggle to push the original two out of the way.

Now as the powerful human group not only tightened around the dying dog but also shifted in an unconscious circle, this last man also moved inward and around till he too in his turn was opposite, and Juana saw in his eyes a manic shine with far more burn in it than that possessing any of the others, and she knew at once that this was a man who needed something like the first killing of the dog for reasons that lay within and were far more powerful than the mere outside glory open to the hunter with his kill.

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himself into a position just behind the dog's head. A long shout from the man with the broken pitchfork told the rest in pidgin to be careful: a bite from a mad dog about to die would surely send the bitten man to death after many kinds of suffering of which it would be better not to speak. As this shout rose and died the man with the swollen scrotum raised his weapon high toward the sun: it was a pickax with a handle made lean in the middle but thickening toward the ends to fit the hole in the metal head and the opening made by grasping human hands.

The way in which the eager, fearful carefulness of the whole circle was broken by the descent of the last man's pickax was so swift and so sudden that even though the blow had been expected, it still surprised the watching eye, and the trueness of its aim was uncanny. For the point of the implement went in not far from the exact middle of the dog's head. In the first few moments nothing happened save for a twitching movement—it could have been of joy or of fear—that ran down the tight body of the man who had shattered the dog's life. That, and a whimper barely audible, a sound expressing not surpassed sadness but a final acceptance, and it came from the boy who had tried so impotently to save his friend.

Then around the buried point of the weapon the dog's life began its final coming. It was white at first, the matter of the animal's brains, then blood mixed it with a tentative light brown that deepened into red with a stronger flow. In the middle of the road the white ooze reached the black tar before the red blood, now that it had begun to spurt, first joined and then covered everything around the pierced head.

The last man with the swollen sac was twitching no longer. Instead, with a shout that was abrupt and high he twisted his pickax cleverly so that the dog's head did not slip from it, and then he raised the whole high up in victory. The other men parted, each drawing back to make way for him. All watched him with the tension now gone low in their bodies and the sweat now beginning to dry and to leave faint salt streaks on them. The circle broke in silence, and the men who had formed it strained almost involuntarily, following the last man who had become the first to kill the dog, first with their eyes, and then bodily walking after him.

The triumphant killer walked off with his prize in a strange way, as if it were his intention to go through all the motions of a runner while keeping a walker's speed. The drip of life came down from the upturned end of the pickax. But from the man himself something else had commenced to drip: down along his right leg flowed a stream of something yellow like long-thickened urine mixed with streaks of clotted blood. A look of terror stopped the man's triumph as first he felt the drip and then looked down to see what it could be. The fallen child had risen. Seeing the humiliation of the killer of his dog, he was now shouting, laughing through his tears,

"Fat balls, hei!"

The boy was still weeping, and the shout had turned his silent grief into a hysterical mixture of suffering for his lost dog and mockery of the killer. But for the killer himself, a wild feeling of relief seemed to have come in place of the first, short fear. Something that had stayed locked up and poisoned the masculinity of his days was now coming down, and in spite of all his shame he seemed seized by an uncon-

trollable happiness that made him walk with the high, proud, exaggerated steps of a puppet.

"Hei, *tilati*, hei, hei!" the boy shouted again.

The woman from the KALIFONIA MOONBEAM CAFE looked contemptuously at the dripping man and at the other members of his now broken circle moving away, and she spat a long stream of spittle after them.

"Killers," she said, making no attempt to shout. "Killers, and all they wanted was a meal."

A new access of sobbing took hold of the boy and he began again his long weeping explanation to which none of the men had listened. There was no hysteria now, neither weeping nor laughter.

Now that the road was clear an impatient honk came from somewhere behind, and several other cars took up the sound and filled the air with it. A Shell tanker had stopped with all its length and huge bulk in the dead middle of the road. Passing it was impossible, except for one man on a Honda who threaded his way past all the drivers trapped in their cars behind the tanker, smiling wickedly and waving at them all. When he passed by Juana he turned to take a second, closer look. She waved back, and with a very satisfied grin he rode off. Then the tanker moved at last, the cars behind it started, and Juana took her place in the line of traffic going out of the city. Drivers in a hurry, driving mostly new white Mercedes or light gray Peugeot cars, sped angrily by trying to get past the long Shell tanker in front. Juana let them pass, going slowly, looking at the life that lined the roadside. Where the road began opening out, half a mile past the last

of the petrol stations, was a shut-down distillery — the end of someone's dream.

A man drove by with a speed whose sureness indicated a complete trust in the machine under his control. His car swung out past two cars, hesitated a moment behind the Shell tanker before squeezing past it calculated seconds before a green Mercedes bus came the opposite way. The two cars ahead also moved out past the tanker, leaving Juana directly behind it. Through Teshie, past the Military Range with its distant numbered practice targets and the sea beyond it still blue and beautiful, the road remained wide and the traffic was fast, but still people crossed, and once a pair of young eyes stared hard through her advancing windscreen at Juana, and the eyes had in them both a simple defiance and also something close to a precocious knowledge that a sudden violent death would not be such a bad thing after all.

Around a corner out front Juana just had the time to see a small india-rubber ball bounce swiftly across the road in front of the Shell tanker and then in a reflex reaction she pressed hard on her brake as a child ran after the ball, knowing nothing of the huge vehicle's advance. Juana only heard the noise as the tanker shuddered with a brutal suddenness to a stop. When she was able to open her eyes again she saw the child still running, but with a terrified slowness now, and when he tried to leap over the open drain at the side of the road he missed the other lip and fell hard against the mossy side. From the tanker the angry driver had descended and was advancing toward the child, and not with love. But before the driver could get to him the child had scrambled over the gutter's edge. From the nearest house a woman

emerged, her hands dripping red with the palm oil of her cooking. The child leaped at her whimpering and burying his face in the cloth over her belly, and she held him hard against herself, the veins on her hands and neck standing out with the palpitation of her fear. The driver advanced relentlessly, his anger plain on his face, till the mother saw him and began to beg.

"*Owura* driver," she said in Akan, and Juana strained to understand, "forgive him. He's a child. Perhaps you have one like him. *Owura*, forgive him, he doesn't know."

The mother's face was twisted with her anxiety, but through it she managed to force a smile to sweeten the temper of the angry man. But suddenly the driver seemed to have forgotten about the child, and his anger brought on a scowl of contempt.

"And you," he said with a slowness intended to wound, "are you a woman and a mother? What kind of mother, that you leave your own child out, to play with death? What kind of woman are you?"

The difficult smile did not go from the woman's face. "Yes, I beg your forgiveness for myself also, but spare him. He is only a child."

"And you are a foolish woman!" the driver shouted.

"Yes, *Owura* driver," the woman said. "Insult me. I will accept your abuse for the gift of his life." The smile had gone now, but in its place there was no answering anger, only a sober, accepting look. "His father works. In Tema. He comes late, and he must eat. I must cook. I must wash. And the child. What can I say to him when he wants to play?"

"You should have thought of that before you spread your thighs apart." The driver turned, walked with a tense calmness across the road, and climbed up into his high seat.

"Insult me, *Owura*," the woman continued saying. "So long as I have his little life, insult me. There is hope."

The driver started his engine and the tanker roared off. Then the woman's face hardened as she looked down at her child and she began asking angry scolding questions, but midstream her harshness broke and turned instead into an inquiry that sounded long and very loving and was filled with a palpable wonder. She seemed flooded with something coming from inside herself, and she shook with the emotion of her own silent crying, tears dropping freely and slipping down the black arms of the child.

When Juana started again, her thoughts were of salvation. A mood, perhaps, brought on by the near-accident. She had seen the mother's fear of something so nearly final, and in herself she had felt something of the tremendous luck of the moment, when the mother had trembled with all that sorrow for what could have happened and with gratitude that it had not. And then the resolve to take care from the lucky moment of salvation onward, but the last thing she said had brought out her knowing fear of the immensity of the long hazard ahead.

"This life," she had said, looking down from the sky at her child with the tears falling more slowly, shaking her head. This life. All the woman knew. A long stretch of danger with both ends unknown, the only certain things being the constant threat and the presence of loss on a way lined with

infrequent, brief, unlikely hopes and once in a long while such unexpected miracle escapes from the edge of the unknown.

Again, the question rose to force the direction of her thoughts: whether all this was worth anything. What meaning could hope have in an environment so completely seized with danger and so many different kinds of loss? It was too widely spread, the damage. Even of physical destruction, of broken bodies, the town was a prolific creator. The thing that made such small saving attempts as she was capable of unreal was the magnitude of the need, and the far greater magnitude of other, more immediate needs. But then such thoughts had no rest in them. It takes a huge amount of energy to drive a human mind against points hard enough to fracture it. More to solder it. Where then was the justification for the long effort to push back into this life those who had found it harder than the woman and had fallen down into things set deeper within themselves? What justification for sending the once destroyed back to knock again against the very things that had destroyed their peace? It had been possible to think of abstract things, of comparisons, of environments and types of adaptation. Until coming out from behind the mosquito screens of government bungalows one actually went into the environment and saw life lived not with it but of necessity *against* it. Until such knowledge the life here, the thick suffocating rumors that filled long lines of weeks, the news itself that appeared in the government papers, all this was too strange, too hopelessly bizarre, for comprehension. Once a small item in the *National Times* had mentioned the arrest of two men for wearing T-shirts

with cartoons of sweating wrestlers on them under the printed caption

STRUGGLERS!

Too bold, an editorial the following day had called the T-shirts and the words on them. What purpose, demanded the editor, could such images and words have, save to trouble the peaceful minds of hardworking citizens with a view to subverting the nation as a whole?

On every journey Juana had passed and been passed by many lorries and little Mercedes buses bearing the sign

OBRA YE KO.

One of the first things she had done, on beginning to learn Akan, was to ask what the signs meant. Oh, nothing, just life is war, she was told. There were other signs, cryptic to her until with time she asked and reached the realization that these were signs and words that had grown all too naturally from the place itself and the people here.

She had learned the meaning of another sign when, sick of the quickly worn circuit to which the expatriate crowd kept, from bungalow to work to ingrown parties to nights at the Star after evenings spent chatting with visitors in embassies or at the Ambassador Hotel, to weekends on beaches or in the sun beside the new pool at Akosombo, she had stopped listening to what strangers said about the place and the people and started looking and asking herself. SMOG. Save Me Oh God. The explainer had laughed that time too, long enough to make her ask why.

"Is funny, no?" The explainer was the driver of one such bus bearing the sign. "Poor man never get bank account. But he look far in de sky and he tink in him head he get some last chance. In heaven."

The cryptic signs now made too much sense, and the strangeness of the place all vanished. This was life. But there were always newcomers passing through, who looked at everything and said how picturesque and beautiful it was. They were right. Only the surface was visible to them, and the sun here could make anything shine. But then at first, with the opening out of her own mind to accept the place she had come to, Juana had found it difficult to understand the willingness with which the expatriates kept themselves imprisoned in their little blind incestuous groups. With more looking and understanding she saw it was not really blindness, but a decision quite consciously made not to see, or to see but never to let any real understanding intrude. The expatriates could see the damnation of the ones outside their bored circles. They could talk about it to spice dull dinners, turning the absurdity of the life that had trapped their hosts into laughing matter. And the one or two who somehow found their way to the meaning and the suffering found their food turning bitter in their mouths, retreated into silence and left the place as soon as possible. For what other apparent sanctuaries from life?

As for the people here themselves, they knew. Once during a break Juana had come out to find the nurse Patience arguing with an Assistant from the new Psychiatric Laboratory. His name was Bukari, and it seemed he had said something about the patients being like fish out of water.

"It's their own fault," Patience was saying. "The things they do. They're too adventurous." The word was surprising.

"How, adventurous?"

"You have seen them. Drinkers, wee smokers, occultists, all the strange things they do."

"They first try to find a way out themselves, out of a bad life," Bukari said.

"Well," said Patience, "they succeed in falling out. You are right, then. They're fish out of water."

"Yes. Fish out of water, all these cases. Fish out of water." Bukari was nodding quietly, as if this truth had completely defeated him. Juana was getting back into the consultation room, about to close the door behind her when she heard the last faint words on which Bukari ended his head-shaking acceptance: ". . . out of water, yes. Boiling water."

The road was completely open. Juana drove past the last of the military warning notices, through a gap cut in the low hill, followed the road right almost to the beach itself, then left again and straight east toward Tema. The road lay so close to the sea that in places past rains had eaten deep gullies in the earth, turning it to sand. The breezes had left sand blowing in swirling crescent patterns all the way along the right side of the road. Coconut trees lined the half-firm land between the road and the shore, their leaves gently wind-blown with every swell in the breeze. A dead branch hung with its long leaves brown and stiff with dryness, the trees themselves casting shadows slanted toward the sea,

falling across the sand in dark long parallel lines that sometimes merged by accident with other coconut trees.

The road turned up left again, going over an iron bridge rusty with wet salt, with the old Tema construction sidetrack passing underneath in a straight double line. The black tar swung more sharply left to avoid the small lagoon on the right with the rail line riding between it and the sea on a raised causeway. The lines looked brown with rust and completely deserted now that Tema was a finished thing and no trains passed this way anymore.

After the lagoon the road dipped back toward the sea, then stayed on a straight course. The car swayed slightly left with a sudden strengthening of the breeze from the sea. Juana was now close to the Shell tanker, and it was moving with an increasingly irritating slowness. She honked and got ready to drive past. She could see no sign from the cab of the tanker. When she was half way past its long length, the driver swerved suddenly right into the center of the road. Simultaneously he began to accelerate. From the distance ahead a light brown lorry appeared, coming on fast. By now she had drawn level with the Shell driver, but the man was accelerating steadily, looking sullenly ahead. She decelerated sharply. She waited for the length of the tanker to pass her by on the left, and moved over to the left side of the road just in time to avoid the hurtling lorry.

The suddenness with which slowness had been forced on her turned her mind to asking why she had found her speed so necessary and so enjoyable. She thought the answer would have something to do with the fact of thinking less and seeing less while driving slowly, but there was no time now to follow these thoughts.

Up ahead, she saw a dirt track turn left off the main road. By the time she reached it she had made up her mind to go up it. At first the track bed was of smooth red laterite, recently pressed down. But abruptly it degenerated into a stretch of sharp pebbles that flew apart with the car's advance, and even this was replaced by long gullies and large dangerous stones, plus here and there the still visible marks of heavy trucks and caterpillars. After a sharp climb she stopped the car in a small clearing. The road seemed to have stopped nowhere, but when she looked round she saw the dug-out remains of an old stone quarry.

Around her the vegetation was not forest, but it was high enough to block her view. It was mostly planted crops, crawling groundnuts, cassava now grown high, and here and there the huge wild leaves of a cocoyam plant. She moved along a path crossing the groundnuts. When she came to the end of it she walked along the edge of the cassava stands till she came to another path leading down from the hill. In a while the sea was visible again. Not the shore and the surf, which at that distance were still hidden by the coconuts and the vegetation close by. But against a clear horizon the whole expanse of the sea was visible, and from the hill it seemed so immediately close that for a moment Juana felt she could take one vertical step and fall straight down into it. From time to time the planted vegetation and the tall reeds parted and revealed not only the sea but a ship on it, white and solitary but looking very close. An infantile illu-

sion, this closeness, Juana knew, thinking of forgotten days back home when she had run from her mother's restraining hold thinking she was going down to find this time a ship really touchable on the shore. Even now the urge was not entirely dead, in spite of knowledge and the passage of years.

The undergrowth was thick, and was often hidden to her beneath grass and creepers and fungoid growths taking over once again their earth. Juana lost the path, found it several times again in its continuation farther on, then lost it again when she came to the clearing that was a second farm. It had low cassava stems stuck slanting into the flat earth and mounds of earth serving as beds for heads of yams with hopeful poles stuck in for climbers yet to appear from the red-brown laterite heaps packed with light pebbles and broken lumps of sandstone. Across the clearing Juana had to walk sideways against the steepness of the slope. Sand got into her sandals, and once a sharp lump forced her to stop. When she took it out she saw it was a broken-off piece of a pebble with a spot of her blood on it.

She threw the stone away and, straightening up, saw just along the path a single flower on a stalk that stood up slender almost like a vine. It was yellow. In all the green around and among all the tall reeds, there was nothing else like that flower. Coming across the line of her vision, a bird whose color was a smooth black shading with no visible lines of transition into red, flew noiselessly and came to rest on the flower. She thought the stalk would break or at least bend a long way down, it looked so fragile; but incredibly, it bent only slightly. The impulse to touch that smooth beauty grew strong in her, and she approached the flower quietly, hoping

to draw near without frightening the bird. But before she could take more than a few steps the bird flew upward, hovered almost without any motion just above the greenness, then darted swiftly sideways to settle on a reed more safely out of reach.

The descent was faster now, and easier. The soil was sandier, and only a few cassava stems stuck out of it at intervals that increased until, getting to the side of the road, there was nothing but sandy soil and stones. Juana took her time, waiting for a long gap in the traffic. After the vehicles had passed, while she was crossing the road, she looked down and saw traces of new sand where it had just been pressed into the tar, and she kept looking back at the road even when she had crossed it and was making for the beach. The breeze gained a sudden brief strength and turned into wind that whistled through the coconut leaves and swept fresh sand toward the shiny black middle of the road in curling ears, the farthest sweeps thinning till the last grains, isolated and almost without weight, rose with the small dying swells of the wind and fell again farther along the road, bouncing and then coming to rest, single grains parted from other sand. A truck passed on its way to Tema, and it scattered some of the new grains again and pressed those directly in its path into the tar. The coconut leaves brushed against each other and their parent trunks with an unhurried rhythm, and in the lull Juana caught the far-off sounds of a unison chant that was hot and religious, and two brief jangles of a joyful tambourine.

Now that she was on the beach itself, she looked out over the expanse of the sea. There was a ship, but it was far away,

and every moment made it inexorably smaller with added distance. The illusion and its dissipation were not new to Juana. They were only new reminders of old childish disappointments, coming to her like so many other things here that could very easily be copies or originals of sights she had left behind. With these reminders everywhere there was little hope of any peace to be found in constant movement. There would only be a restlessness whose pain never ended but got dissolved in the knowledge that the fugitive could never leave the causes of her pain behind. The causes would burrow inward, travel along everywhere with the carrying mind, and mix their old traces with the sights and sounds of every new place the traveler came to.

Juana kept her sandals on till she came to the waterline where the sand was not so hot because the surf washed up all the way and gave it a cool firmness. The music of voices and tambourines was no longer intermittent. It came in waves that grew stronger as she walked along the edge of the surf, keeping just out of reach of the farthest fingers of every fresh wave. A few yards upward to her right the sand was thoroughly disturbed where dozens of feet had trampled it, going up a rise just ahead of her. When she herself came to the rise she saw the makers of the footprints and the sounds.

They were about a quarter of a mile away, a group numbering easily over a hundred. They were singing, and all swaying in time with their music except that now and then an arm shot out above all those heads and shook a shiny tambourine. The group stood packed together away from the sea, but they seemed completely unmindful of the heat of the sand underfoot. Seaward from them, standing where the

sand was cool and the waves still gently frothy around his feet, a man with a thick beard and a long white robe gesticulated, danced and swayed with the music, and kept it going till he himself seemed exhausted. Then he raised his hand and brought it suddenly down, and with swift obedience the singing and the tinkling of tambourine bells all stopped, and only the breeze from the sea was to be heard. The bearded man beckoned in a movement that was filled with his sureness of his own authority. A woman detached herself and drew near him. He stopped her at the point where the hot sand met the wet, and began to speak to his followers. The woman in the middle translated the words, for the preacher's message was in English. Juana was close enough to hear the English words, and it pleased her also to know how much of the Akan was readily comprehensible to her now. The bearded man in his white robe spoke mainly of fire. Different kinds of fire, fire from the Old Testament Bible, the fire of God's anger and his glory, matched with the burning unending fire of the devil in his hell, and as the message got to them his hearers groaned in their despair and sweated where they stood out there with the hot sand underfoot. Then the message turned sweet with the promise of rest and the cool peace of heaven waiting for the good, and now cries of "Jesus! Oh JESUS!" broke from suffering throats. Two women screamed deliriously and in a frenzy tore their own clothes to bits, then lay down in the burning sand and began rolling naked to the sea. A man moved to stop them, but the bearded man in his long white robe raised a commanding hand and at the same time shouted loud enough so that even above the general noise his words were clearly heard.

"Come to me!" he said. "Let them come to me!" The man

who had moved regained the group. "Come to me, all of you! Come to me in the nakedness of your first days!"

The shout was followed immediately by a long wail filled with suffering and desire, rising as if by prior agreement from almost all those throats, tearing the air. At the same time more women dropped their clothes, and the group that had stood and chanted became a mass of human flesh and limbs rolling in the sand and sending cries up toward the sky. The bearded man, with the help of two men, waited for the rolling women to reach him, then with each incoming wave from the sea he held each roller's head beneath the water a number of seconds, then left the body in his helpers' hands while he seized another naked woman for the holy rite.

Juana put her sandals back on and skirted the group, then walked on west. From time to time she looked back over her shoulder and saw the worshipers, now exhausted, successively rolling to a rest in the dry sand.

Over in the far distance, she could see the white form, very small at this distance, of the old slave castle which had now become the proud seat of the new rulers, the blind children of slavery themselves. She knew it was no use asking anyone any questions about that. No one seemed to need forgiveness, and it was no use feeling sorry for oneself, for crimes borne by people with whom one identified. The real crime now was the ignorance of past crime, and that, it seemed, would be a permanent sort of ignorance in places like this and places like home. How lean things were around her: the tall lean coconut trees with their shadows elongated by the sun, crabs with long, lean legs disappearing down small holes at her approach.

What a curse it was to have the constant remembrance of a time when youth was not something one had lived through, not just a defeated thought, but the hope of consant regeneration, the daring to reach out toward a new world. Life then had taken its color from the brilliance of an always imminent apocalypse, and if the beautiful colors were mixed with the red of blood and the sulfurous yellow of flames, that was in no way a reason to run from the dream. The burning of old frames and the shedding of cruel blood would not be against the making of another world. Life had a charge, and every day's efforts had at their end the hope that things dreamed of had been brought closer. Now she was getting used to continuing without the steam and the charge. It should have been easy to cut disturbing dreams down to the size of the self alone, to walk in peace here when despair threatened, in the sun and shadows beneath the coconut trees, and to look at the light shaken by the movement of the sea. There were things here that could also suggest the message of peace, if only the inner turbulence would find a way to die.

The first months here had been terrible for a mind that had come prepared to find its own part in a struggle assumed to be going on. But watching and listening, moving and learning what life was about in this place, she had understood that what she had thought she would find was not here at all. None of the struggle, none of the fire of defiance; just the living defeat of whole peoples—the familiar fabric of her life. After such an understanding, peace should perhaps have come, but that was also impossible, with so many reminders around of the impotence of victims and of the blindness of

those who had risen to guide them. She had learned ways of making the necessary peace for herself. Adjustment. Something necessary and true, though she had gotten into the habit of laughing at the bald word itself. A matter of knowing what visions people lead their lives by, or by what visions life leads them. And survival. A matter of adopting a narrower vision every time the full vision threatens danger to the visionary self.

The small form of the distant castle brought memories, and again her doubts returned: why had she really come here? When would she make the decision about leaving or staying? What sense would there be in a final decision to stay now that she knew there were people here who knew of the awfulness of the life around them, who had the power given them to do something to change all this, but who were, like people she had known at home and in all her travels, only concerned with digging themselves a comfortable resting place within a bad system? People with their eyes deliberately closed against the knowledge that their own useless lives were part of the slow dissolution of their peoples, doomed to an extinction started long ago. It had been so strange, sitting after midnight one nearly forgotten day when the newness was still there, watching the dreamy dancers flow like bound people round the circle of the dance floor at the Star; with the desire to find sleep far from her mind, it had been strange to ask for the meaning of the new Ramblers' song, and to have the smiling young Ghanaian doctor who was her partner say calmly to her,

> Happy are those whose life is today
> and only today.
> Sad are the prophets
> and those others whose eyes are open to the past.
> Blessed are they who neither see their painful yesterdays
> nor their tomorrows filled with despair:
> They shall rest in peace.

It hadn't been so long ago, but many events had happened, and things had risen to the surface in her own mind and around her which tended always toward the disturbing sensation that even the small areas of personal peace would not last long.

In the distance, moving toward her, she saw a group of young men, five or six. It would be good to walk without fear among a people she had wished to live with as her own, but these days were full of so much violence used in the hope of stealing so little, that she too had come to accept as permanent a violence directed only against the weak, and to seek refuge in distrust and flight. She turned back. The group seemed to be gaining on her, till she began running toward the prophet and his followers, and then the young men stopped and lay down upon the sand.

Before Juana came to the worshipers the prophet had finished a last speech and the gathering had started breaking up. In little bands they climbed up the sand to wait by the roadside to get on small buses returning from Tema to Accra. After the third bus the prophet said farewell to those remaining and moved with the two men who had helped him at the water's edge, the woman who had translated his words into Akan, and two other women, toward a light blue Mercedes

parked among the coconut trees farther down. Juana had not noticed the car. When it took off she noticed the prophet was not driving it. One of his helpers was acting as the chauffeur.

The waiting worshipers thinned out as more buses came and went. Juana was thinking of going back herself when she noticed one of the prophet's followers. She was not waiting with the others by the road, but sitting on the beach with her back curved against the convex side of a big timber log stranded out of the water's reach. She had her legs spread out in front of her, and as Juana approached her she thought her eyes were closed against the sun. Her clothes showed no signs of having been taken off on the beach and put back on, and her eyes must have been only half shut, because it was she who greeted Juana, in English. The woman looked not yet fifty but long past forty and still beautiful with teeth that shone white when she spoke or smiled. When Juana answered her greeting she began a conversation with an eagerness that had at the same time something girlish and something very coquettish in it.

"You are an Afro-American," the woman said.

"Puerto Rican," Juana answered.

"What does that mean?"

"Something like the same thing, really. I have spent most of my life in America, and some of my people also came from here. And you?"

"I have never traveled anywhere," the woman said. She drew her shawl, made of the same green fabric as her cloth and blouse, closer around her shoulders, but the wind lifted it again and made it hang with a look of pretty negligence

from one shoulder only. "Oh, I have made small journeys, but always here in this country. I was born here and have never been anywhere. Except twice to Togo."

"Do you come here often?"

"You mean with the prophet? This is my first time."

"Will you continue?"

"Come and sit down," the woman said, smoothing out the sand beside her. Juana sat. "Yes, I will continue following him, if it is true . . ."

"If what is true?"

"If I get what I want. The prophet has promised me something, if only I have faith and follow him."

"Is it a secret, the thing he has promised you?"

The woman smiled, very coyly. "Perhaps you know," she said.

"Money?" Juana guessed.

"Ah, everybody wants money. But that is not why I came to the prophet. Not yet, anyway."

"A husband?"

"Ei! You know many of the reasons why people come to the prophet." The smile was even coyer now. "But I am not a young girl anymore, though I can tell you that some men . . ." She winked at Juana.

"A child?" Juana asked, winking back. The woman's answer surprised her.

"Something like that." She did not seem about to continue, but Juana could not prevent her from seeing her puzzled look, and in a while she added, "I know what you are thinking. I think you are thinking I'm a strange woman because I want a child."

"Well —" Juana could not find the evasive words she sought — "at home too, where I come from, our people will do anything to get a child."

"Children are the most important things in this life," the woman answered, giving the statement the quiet finality of truths held to be self-evident.

"And you don't have any?" Juana asked.

The woman again caught her wind-blown shawl, rearranged it over her shoulders, and then held up three fingers of her right hand for Juana to see. "You don't understand," she said. "I have had three children. One died young. The child I am waiting for is not new. He is — let me see — now twenty-five. No, that's his school age. Twenty-six, really."

"He's left?"

"Oh —" the woman touched her belly gently — "he went away to study. He will come back a man. A big man." She turned round and looked over the timber log, out at the sea. Pointing, she said, "He will be coming from over there, or out of the sky, in a plane." She paused; then, as if this was something that needed to come out, like breath, she added, "Five years. It's five years since he went away, and I have been fearing he was totally lost."

Juana smiled and said, "A mother's fears —" She was cut short.

"No. He did not want to come back."

"Why not?"

"I do not understand," the woman said, and her eyes had begun to fill with tears. "I cannot understand. All my hopes went with him, and he was going to leave me here, like an old woman on the shore, struggling to take my snuff in a

hurricane." Her tears stayed unshed, and she smiled. "Because of him I have come to the prophet. I have prayed harder than any woman who has lost her most precious trinkets, and I do not want to tempt God, but I think my prayers are soon to be answered."

"You have had good news?"

"He has written, and he is coming. I don't know when. He didn't say. He would be here by now, but he fell very ill."

"What's his name?"

"Baako."

"You know nothing of his illness?"

"Nothing," said the woman, shaking her head. "Nothing. It has been confusing. They say there was nothing wrong with his body. The prophet says it was a sickness of the soul, sent by God to bring my lost one back to me."

"You believe the prophet."

"Not everything he says. But about my son, I must believe him."

"Where did he go?"

"America."

"I see." Juana looked up, and found herself having to squint against the descending sun.

"Tell me," the woman said, "what is there that so many of our young people go there and do not want to return? I am not the only one."

"I don't know," Juana answered. "You think it is something there holding him?"

"What else could it be?"

"Things here he is afraid to come back to?"

The woman ignored the query completely, filling the silence after it with a long sigh. Then, as if it was something new that had struck her, she said, "I hope he comes, that's all. Soon." She got up and nodded in the direction of the road, then began walking away.

"You must love your son very much," Juana said after her, but she had not shouted the words, and the wind carried them away. The woman had not heard, but suddenly Juana saw her stop. She was saying something, but against the wind the sound of her words was inaudible. Juana strained to hear her, then gave up and moved toward the woman where she had stopped.

"I could not hear you," Juana said.

"I was asking where you worked. Perhaps I will come and see you one day."

"Korle Bu Hospital. The new wing."

"It's so beautiful," the woman said. Juana smiled. "You are a doctor?"

"A psychiatrist, yes."

When the two came to the first row of coconut trees the woman stopped to pick up a yellowish leaf, freshly fallen. She separated the long, hard spine, broke it near its base and put the smaller piece in between her teeth. At the roadside the last of the remaining worshipers were climbing into a small Datsun bus that had just stopped. The woman looked uncertainly after them.

"I'll drive you into town," Juana said. Her companion smiled and thanked her. "I left my car up on that hill. I'm going up to get it. You can wait here for me."

"I can climb up with you."

"It's a steep climb," Juana said.

The woman laughed. "I should be saying that to you."

But by the time they got to the car, Juana was the less winded of the two, and the woman, when she opened the door for her, sat down and sighed gratefully, breathing heavily while Juana turned the car round.

"Where do you live?" she asked.

"Kaneshie," the other said. "But you can drop me anywhere in town, and I'll wait for a bus."

"The buses are slow here."

"I know. Some never come."

"I'll take you home. It's only two miles from Kaneshie to Korle Bu," Juana said.

There was not much traffic on the way back. Even the Circle looked a bit deserted, and along the cemetery road into Kaneshie not a single car passed. Juana drove slowly, prompting the woman for further instructions at every turning. Each time, she saw her retreat into a sort of absent-minded dream immediately after telling her where next to turn.

"There!" the woman said finally, pointing to a low house with a red roof and a white wall surrounding it.

"It's a pretty house," Juana said, stopping at the gate.

"Do you think so?" the woman asked eagerly. "Do you really think it will be good enough for a been-to?"

Juana did not know what to say. She smiled self-consciously and said again, "I hope your son returns soon."

"Oh, I hope so too, with all my soul." She closed the door, too softly, so that Juana had to reach over and shut it more

firmly. As the woman walked to her gate she looked back and thanked Juana again.

"You told me your son's name," Juana half shouted after her, "but I still don't know yours."

"Efua," the woman said, coming closer. "And you, Doctor?"

"Juana."

"Doctor Juana."

"No. Just Juana. Doctor isn't my name. It's just my job."

The woman's smile turned into open laughter, and she waved to Juana all the way till she turned the Link Road corner and made for the West Ring Road intersection. She did not feel tired, or sad. The safe confusing numbness had returned, and she drove at an even speed along the familiar way back to the hospital.

3 : Akwaaba

When the airport bus came to a stop, slanted into a slot beside four others, Baako avoided the initial stampede of passengers in a hurry. When the press had eased he rose and picked up his luggage — suitcase, portable typewriter and guitar — and went down the bus steps, turning slightly sideways to get through the door. The hazed green glass windows of the bus had given the light outside a certain dark softness. Abruptly this quality had changed to a klieg intensity that gave the atmosphere around something of a bleached, ashen quality and made even the warmth of the afternoon feel deceptively cool. Ahead, a woman with her hair gone completely white emerged pushing a trolley with two blade-blue suitcases on it onto the sidewalk and right toward a short line of taxis. When she had gone Baako put his luggage on the empty trolley and pushed it to the next door marked ENTRÉE — IN. The wheels of the trolley touched the black rubber apron in front of the entrance, the glass doors swung in away from him and he walked into the long building.

Inside, the light coming through the long glass walls did

not seem to have lost any of its high intensity. If anything, the parallel lines of fluorescent tubes running overhead increased it, filling the air with a surfeit of whiteness.

Baako scanned the airway counters along the wall on the right and pushed his trolley over to one over which the illuminated sign said

AIR AFRIQUE.

Behind it sat two girls in blue-gray uniform. One of them was black and wore a wig that had a single bleached strand leading its general dark brown mass. The other was a lean blonde who sat there staring absently ahead with her lower lip caught firmly between her teeth. When Baako drew opposite the blonde he checked the trolley's slide and asked her, "Do you speak English?" The girl indicated the black one did, and Baako moved over.

"I have a ticket that I got changed at the Invalides." He held out the ticket, and the black girl took it and studied it.

"New York, Paris," she said softly. "Ah, Paris, Accra. Yes, there is a flight at sixteen hours forty-five minutes. Passengers will be called at sixteen hours fifteen minutes."

"Where do I go?"

"Straight down here," she pointed down the length of the building. "When you come to the clock, follow the arrow. After the point of rendezvous, there, you will find the entrance to the Customs upstairs. You can check your baggage here."

Baako took his suitcase out of the trolley and placed it on the low scale beside the counter.

"And the instrument?" the girl asked, looking at the pointer on the scale. "Your bag is not very heavy."

"I know," Baako said, "but I think I'd better keep my guitar with me."

"You are afraid it will be broken?" The girl shook her head and smiled. "It will be safe."

"O.K." Baako placed the guitar beside his suitcase. The girl tilted her head to look at the pointer.

"Perfect," she smiled.

Baako smiled back, thanked her, and pushed the trolley left toward a row of several more like it near one of the doors. When he was almost at the door he took out the typewriter and pushed the trolley carefully. It rolled forward and got telescoped into the last. He walked to the luminous dial and followed its arrow right. Some ten yards to the left another line of counters began, stretching away into the interior distance. In the space between the two sets of counters a polished aluminum globe revolved slowly, suspended in the center. A white equatorial band circled it, showing the blue lettering on it that said alternately,

POINT DE RENCONTRE RENDEZVOUS POINT.

Long red benches formed a low square behind the globe. Baako found an empty place facing the globe with the outside light behind it and sat looking at the thin rods descending from the globe, with small, discreetly polished and slightly curved panels, also of aluminum, wrapped at staggered intervals around them.

Watching the turning globe and listening to the occasional glad exclamations that broke the soft, indeterminate talk

around him, he felt the vague nausea threatening to return, weaker this time but still unsettling, starting with a tightening sensation somewhere near the top and back of his skull. He closed his eyes, but that only made the feeling worse. Opening them, he rose and took a few steps past the globe, looking for the dial. The clock said 3:52. He walked back to his seat, picked up the typewriter and went to the check point at the bottom of the escalators. The guard looked at his ticket, asked to see his passport, gave both back after a cursory examination, and let him through.

Past shiny invitations to a row of elevators and a bar, Baako took a second escalator. A panel at the bottom had promised an art gallery here, but there was only a small maze of bright, empty display boards under the acoustic-tiled ceiling. Beyond the escalators another sign advertised a restaurant open on the floor above:

LES TROIS SOLEILS.

The brilliance of the letters was reflected in the polished floor. Walking round the display boards, Baako found himself listening to the soft sound of falling water, then looking at an indoor waterfall with the water at the bottom illuminated from below. Big hunks of dead wood had been arranged in the water to create an illusion of tropicality. Where the wood stood out of the water it had gone a dry, powdery white; but the immersed portions made brown and yellow patterns with the mixture of light and water that made the illusion begin to look alive. Baako placed his typewriter near the pool's edge and bent to touch the water. It was cold, but just behind the biggest log two live ducks were

slowly, almost imperceptibly, moving in it as if the cold light from below gave them heat enough. One of them climbed onto the side of the pool, leaving the other alone, and the momentary violence of its motion fractured the shimmering light over the stones at the bottom of the water. Sitting on the containing ledge, Baako watched the two ducks and the logs with the water shaking and falling around and behind them, looking at the ceiling reflected beneath the water when it was nearly still, until a soft, pervading female voice from nowhere began repeating in dreamy amplified tones the message: "Passengers on Air Afrique Flight two-zero-nine Paris, Accra, Brazzaville, please report now at gate number forty-three." The voice flowed on into German and French with the same studied softness.

Baako went down to the floor with the DEPARTURES sign and followed the arrows indicating the way to gates 38–45. Next to one set of gates a young African dressed in blue work uniform stood staring a long time at a row of postcards before making up his mind and picking four with the long lean silver lines of the *Concorde* airliner stretched against the unreal blue of a photo artist's sky. A little smile relaxed his lips below the still anxious look in his eyes as he moved toward the counter to pay for this latest dream vision of his life abroad, to be sent to his waiting ones back home.

Now there were small knots of passengers moving along the wide corridor past the series of signs pointing to the gates below. Baako moved with them down a flight of white marble stairs turning in a spiral around a central pillar of new aluminum. On the ground floor the waiting planes

could be seen through the glass wall of the final waiting room. An Air Afrique stewardess announced departing time, placed herself at the exit and took the boarding passes extended to her, giving back passports and vaccination certificates. Ahead of Baako, an African in a dark wool suit turned just after he got through the gate, waved and smiled a very happy smile. Baako turned his head, looking behind him to see for whom the smile could have been meant; but all he saw was a line of white faces none of which seemed to have noticed the black man's smile out front. He turned and saw the smiler walking with a confident tread toward the plane opposite.

"Have your passports and vaccination certificates ready, please," repeated the stewardess, "as well as your boarding passes."

Inside the plane, the forward seats seemed all taken, but behind them there were several empty spaces. Baako searched for one next to a window, a little way back of the left wing. He pushed his typewriter into a tight fit on the overhead hand luggage rack. As he did so he noticed, four seats in front of him, the generous mass of a wig protruding above the tall back of the seat itself, a shiny black in the gray-white light within the plane. Beside the wig a hand suddenly shot upwards and sideways, its blackness cut off from the blackness of its coat sleeve by a lucent white cuff, and a single finger summoned an advancing stewardess. With a steady smile the stewardess stopped and leaned over listening to the beckoner, and as Baako sat down he saw her shake her head, still smiling while her lips moved making inaudible sounds, and then she said loudly enough, "Later,

when the plane takes off." Still smiling, she walked swiftly by, making for the back of the plane. In a moment Baako heard her voice, and then the suppressed titters of the other stewardesses before the red letters shone overhead: NO SMOKING. FASTEN YOUR SEAT BELTS. Simultaneously the amplified sweetness of a caressing female voice flowed softly all through the plane's interior, its smile a very audible part of it.

"Mesdames et Messieurs: Le Commandant Szynkarski et son équipe vous souhaitent la bienvenue à bord de ce DC–8. Nous allons décoller en quelques instants en direction de Brazzaville. Nous ferons escale à Accra . . ." The voice glided smoothly on into German and then into English. ". . . an oxygen supply is provided for each passenger. Masks are located in the back of the seat in front of you. They can be reached after the panel has been automatically opened."

The plane shook slightly and the noise of engines sucking air rose to a muffled, whining screech, dipped and rose again as the plane rode forward to the edge of the airfield, then turned in a circle with the grass in view to the left. It stopped, but in a few moments the engines were racing again, and this time the crescendo of strength did not fall until the whole craft bumped evenly and rose above the retreating surface below.

The black man in the wool suit made several trips to the rear of the plane and back to his seat, his movements as well as the smile on his face exuding an irrepressible happiness, as if in the atmosphere of the plane he had found an element that suited him completely, and he needed to let everyone

and everything around him know this. In his passage every time he bestowed a smile upon Baako, who after the second time looked out through the window and wondered if he could avoid a more direct intrusion from the restless one.

The man in the dark wool suit came over just when the long, thin roads of North Africa were disappearing below and the ripply patterns of Saharan sand, from the blinding yellow into the deep, dark brown, had grown to be all that was to be seen in the distant, endless landscape. He came over with a smile like something learned from the advertisements for beer or whisky or cigarettes made specially for the new Africans, and long moments after he had sat down the smile was still on his face. With careful, studied movements he raised slightly the left lapel of his coat, slid his right hand under it and from somewhere between the coat and the waistcoat produced a packet. The cellophane of it caught the light from the reading lamp just overhead as the man in the wool suit held out the packet.

"Cigarettes?" he offered.

"No. No, thanks."

Softly the man in the suit patted his outside pockets. In a moment he had found what he was looking for. He brought out a lighter which seemed to have been sculpted entirely out of light, and gave it a lingering caress just before his thumb brushed smartly across the knob. The flame which shot out was several inches long, but its line was narrow and beautifully controlled, and the man in the suit used it just as it was, waiting till the end of his cigarette had been glowing for seconds already before he began to turn the flame down, slowly, like someone absorbed in deep thought. When the

flame died he inserted the lighter back in his pocket.

"You don't smoke?" he asked.

"Sometimes."

The man moved closer, turning in the seat as he did so, and held out his hand.

"Brempong is my name," he said. "Henry Robert Hudson Brempong."

"Baako."

"Is that your Christian or your surname?" Brempong asked.

"No Christian name," said Baako. "I'm not a Christian."

"You know," said Brempong, "you know, your other names." He chuckled, a bit uncertainly, at the end.

"Onipa."

"It's an unusual name," Brempong said.

"My family name," said Baako. "I think of it as a very common name myself."

"Ah, yes," Brempong laughed. "I see what you mean, yes, yes."

Baako saw there would be no way to escape the other's friendly approaches. He took one more look out through his window. Just under the plane he could see a brilliant roll of clouds, and looking at them he felt they were almost tangible, and powerfully inviting. As he stared out the mat of clouds underneath parted once, and through the opening he saw below more of the changing sameness of the Sahara. Over the Mediterranean he had tried, in a way, to produce in himself a mood of complete calm, to ignore every thought, every idea that came to him asking to be followed, to get his mind absolutely free for the understanding of the coming moment.

He had wondered what the first sight of the continent would be like for him, and he had watched steadily as the sheet of the blue Mediterranean was left behind.

In the end the actual physical presence of Africa passed under quite softly for him too, like something entirely normal. He had not become suddenly aware of any unusually strong feelings, or indeed of any feeling at all. Instead, it was thoughts that had come to him as the blue sea became brown land, the green of it only an occasional thing against the huge and flowing background. He had had thoughts, very clear and sharp, of the enormity of things here and of the sameness of what was below, and also these strange thoughts, peopled with the living aftermath of amazing crimes still unable to discover what it was that had happened not so very long ago, totally dazed by the present's continuation. And yet, so high above the earth and the water, even thoughts like these had not raised any unusual feelings, or quite simply any feelings at all, except this huge desire for an absorbing quiet.

"I didn't meet you in London," Brempong was saying.

"I haven't been in London," Baako said.

"Ah, that's why, that's why." Then, after a pause, "But where were you?"

"America. New York."

"New York? Oh yes, New York." Brempong hesitated, as if he was sure there was something he wanted to say about New York, something he had forgotten in the passing moment. Finally, apropos of nothing, he said, "It's good to be going home."

Baako smiled, very faintly.

"You are amused," said Brempong.

"Not really." Baako turned slightly, the better to see his fellow traveler. "A little nervous, that's all."

"There's nothing to fear," said his companion, "nothing. Of course at home we can't swing as much as in London, or New York, but . . ."

"That's not what I meant."

Brempong frowned. "I don't get you."

"I don't know what I'm going to find."

"You've been away a long time?"

"Five years."

Brempong smiled expansively. "Do you know how many years, total, I have spent out of Ghana?" Taking a deep puff on his cigarette, he leaned slowly back till his head touched the back of his seat, and then he blew out the smoke in a thin line, directly into the light socket above him. "Do you know? Eight years, total. Eight full years."

"All spent in the same country?"

"Ah, not quite," said Brempong. "And I've been going back home from time to time. But most of the time I was in Britain." He gave a small chuckle. "I know the old country like the back of my hand."

"And you still don't find it hard going back?"

"Oh no. No. But I understand you. I have learned to take precautions, myself. There are important things you can't get to buy at home. Every time I go out I arrange to buy all I need, suits and so on. It's quite simple. I got two good cars on this trip. German cars, right from the factory, all fresh. They're following me. Shipped."

Baako looked up, following the curve of the plane's ceiling.

"You see this." Brempong had brought out his lighter. "Where in Ghana would you find a thing like this? Sharp eyes. I bought it in Amsterdam, at the airport, actually. Beautiful things there, Amsterdam. Tape recorders. I took one last year, and it has never given me any trouble." He leaned back completely and his voice relaxed to a quiet sound just above a whisper. "You just have to know what to look for when you get a chance to go abroad. Otherwise you come back empty-handed like a fool, and all the time you spent is a waste, useless." A loud, forced guffaw broke the easy tenor of his voice. "But if you come back prepared, there's nothing to worry about."

"I can't say I am prepared," Baako said. "Not in this way."

"You didn't buy anything to travel back with?"

"Nothing. I was a student."

"Still . . ." the shadow of a smile was playing around Brempong's lips, "you finished your studies."

"June."

"July, August . . . Two months. You're going back in a hurry. Something urgent?"

"No, not really. After graduation I went to a workshop. It ended last week."

"A workshop?"

"Yes."

"You are . . ." Brempong hesitated, "an engineer . . ."

"A workshop for practicing writers and producers," Baako said.

"Oh yes, oh yes. Yes, yes. Films and things like that." Brempong smiled. "And you are a producer or a writer?"

"I write," said Baako. "Hope to. Try to, anyway."

"So you'll be writing film stories."

"Scripts, yes."

"For Ghanavision Corporation."

"Yes."

"Ghanavision . . ." Brempong stared thoughtfully past Baako out through the window. "Ghanavision. It's not a bad place, actually. You can get ahead very nicely there, very nicely. You know Asante-Smith, don't you?"

"Not personally. Not very well," said Baako. "But I've heard of him."

"Well, he is a young man. Very young, in fact. Not more than five years older than you. How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

"Well, five or six, seven. Anyway, he's a very young man, this Asante-Smith. But you know already he is the boss of the whole corporation."

Baako laughed softly. "I'm not aiming to become a corporation boss."

"Sure, sure. Not now," said Brempong. "But in a few years, believe me. In a few years." Absently he tried to stub out his cigarette in the small ashtray recessed into the armrest. The attempt was unsuccessful, so that a line of smoke hung over the armrest, faint but steady, only occasionally wavering slightly. The plane took an abrupt drop, but in a moment the flight was smooth again. "Of course," Brempong continued, "a person like Asante-Smith, he knows people. Besides, he is clever. One of his own drinking friends says he has the sweetest tongue in all of Ghana for singing his master's praises. It's the truth. And it doesn't matter to him

even when the masters change. He can sing sweetly for anybody who *dey for top*."

Brempong chuckled slowly to himself and, infected, Baako laughed too.

"Some friend," he said.

"That's what I say too," Brempong agreed. "Well, these things are necessary. You have to know people. Big people, not useless people. Top officials who can go anywhere and say 'Do this, do that, for my boy!' "

"You would advise me to hasten to find me a big man, then?" Baako asked.

"Aah, you joke now. You'll soon see. But you have a job already."

"No."

"What?"

"I don't have a job waiting," said Baako. "But first thing, I'm going to Ghanavision."

"Mistake," Brempong said with an expression between distaste and exasperated concern. "It's a bad mistake you've made. You've put yourself in a very bad position."

"I don't see what else I could have done. I have my certificates, and if they want to test me . . ."

"It's not like that at all. You don't understand. Look, you don't know those who decide. I know them. If you were an expatriate, a white man, it wouldn't matter. You'd have things easy, even without real qualifications." Brempong let out a long breath. "But when you present yourself with your black face like their own, there's no respect. You'll see."

Baako was quiet for several moments, trying to get an understanding of what the other had said; but in the end, failing to get any real grasp of the words, he let them slide away into the even sound of the plane's flight.

"You didn't see me wave to you — before we came on board."

"I did," Baako answered. "A bit late. And I wasn't really sure it was me you were waving to."

"I wasn't sure either. That you were a fellow Ghanaian. You look different, somehow."

"I never thought I looked so different."

"I don't mean facially. But, you know, how you're dressed, how you walk — you don't give the impression that you know you're a been-to. When a Ghanaian has had a chance to go abroad and is returning home, it's clear from any distance he's a been-to coming back."

"Oh well." Baako heard himself laugh, and the sound was weak and hollow; there was nothing he could do about his embarrassment, nothing he could say to hide it.

"I thought you'd come over and sit with us. My wife would have liked to meet you," Brempong said.

"I wanted a seat by a window. To look out."

"I understand. You don't fly very often."

Baako smiled. A stacked trolley stopped quietly in the aisle to his right and a stewardess leaned over and said softly, "We're serving dinner now. You have a choice of drinks — martinis, white wine . . ." The metalwork of the trolley shone with the softly vibrant light in the plane. Out in front a dark head crowned with the mass of a wig stood suddenly upright. Brempong got up. "I must go," he said. "Eugenia is looking for me." He held out his hand, shook Baako's, and squeezed past the stewardess and the food trolley in the aisle. Baako

pressed the blue button at the back of the seat in front of him and disengaged the little folding table. The stewardess placed a tray of ready food on it.

"A ginger ale for me, please."

"One ginger ale, yes," the stewardess echoed, reaching immediately for a squat amber bottle and putting it, freshly opened and fizzing, before Baako. Then she moved on down the aisle.

Baako felt his thirst as a sensation much stronger than his hunger, so that he drank the ginger ale too fast, and then took the paper cup in front of him and drained the water out of it. His body, like some huge, hot sponge, absorbed all that liquid and at the end still had the dry feeling in it, craving more water. He started eating, but after a few mouthfuls he had no appetite left. He tried to eat anyway, but now the taste of meat in his mouth brought back the acid unease that had troubled him so strongly in the morning, the nausea that had pushed him to change his mind so suddenly.

He had thought he would stay a week or so alone in Paris before moving on home, looking, walking around with the little book of street maps and transport line diagrams, getting to see the city and finding out what good films there were to see. But without spending one full day he had fled. He had seen no films, and what he had seen of the city itself before recoiling so abruptly was ridiculously little. It was beautiful, even the small pieces he had seen before the urge to flight became irresistible; but in the attraction of this beauty itself there was the thing that had made enjoyment impossible for him. He had not been able to perceive anything without having it deepen that unsettling feeling that was not only

one of loneliness, but a much more fearful emotion, as if there never was going to be any way out of his giddying isolation, a feeling that waiting would only heighten.

The name of the small hotel he had gone to was already lost somewhere in his memory; he saw no point in making the effort to bring it up again. It had been a short walk from there, past cafés in which mirrors doubled the interior space, to the long garden of the Champ de Mars. There was dirt and old paper lying at the bottom of the shallow square ponds there, but the surface was bright with the sun and with the colors of red and white and blue toy boats sailing under little sails or powered by remote control electricity. Above the boats rose the bronze statue of some martial hero trapped in an attitude of triumphant strain. Turning away from it, Baako walked slowly down the wide path to the left of the central lawn. The rust-brown structure of the Eiffel Tower raised in him no curiosity to go up it and see the city from up there. Past pointing cameras and eyes squinting upward and teeth abandoned by the upper lips of upward looking wonderers, he waited for the light to change and then crossed the road running along the river. From the bridge he could see the long flat form of a rusty barge moored on the other bank. In the distance, over the bottom level of the next bridge a stream of cars sped by, each in turn moving ahead of a slow line of subway coaches — two bright green ones in the lead, a red one in the middle, the remaining two a noticeably duller green — passing overhead. Nearer him, on the left bank, a pleasure boat lay idle, with a blue top and the French tricolor drooping behind it, the flapping edge revealing at intervals the painted sign:

THE LAZY DOLPHIN.

Just behind *The Lazy Dolphin* a small khaki-colored military boat bobbed slowly in the algae-green water with three soldiers in battle uniform seated precariously on its sides. Beside them, a girl with a very high, bright yellow miniskirt stood talking, and whatever she was saying made the soldiers laugh incessantly and hold out their arms to her, inviting her to come and fill their patrol boat. But the moment she raised one leg and seemed about to accept, the little boat suddenly shot halfway out of the water and blew away with a violent roar that made the soldiers' laughter no more audible. The boat cut a quick semicircle in the water and then ploughed off in the direction of the double bridge. The girl laughed and waved after her vanishing friends, then turned for the climb up the stairs leading to the street and the bridge above. Halfway up she stopped and sat on a jutting block of concrete bordering the stairway, and, like almost everybody down there now that the soldiers had disappeared in their boat, she stared at a man who had stood facing the quay wall to the left in a frozen attitude of prayer. The man gave no sign that he cared or even knew that he was what all these holiday-makers were looking at. He wore no shoes, and he had taken off his shirt, leaving only a pair of faded blue workers' trousers. He had a dark red skullcap on. Suddenly he broke from his immobile stance and marched directly forward as if it was his intention to march straight through the high wall. But a step or two from it he stopped just as abruptly as he had begun, and raised his arms above his head worshipfully, supplicating the wall. He bowed, took seven steps sideways to the right, three to the left, and sat down finally with his legs in something like the lotus position and

his head hanging loosely down. On the bridge, Baako felt drawn by an intense interest in what the man down there was doing in his shut-off world, so that without being really aware of what was happening to him he was beginning to try and understand it all, to enter the closed world. The effort, and the awareness of its futility that came when he looked around him and saw the flow of faces seeking happiness, gave his head a depressing feeling of inner lightness. He turned away, walked across the bridge, across the radiating roads beyond it, making for the fountains of white water where his little map showed a green pattern under the word

TROCADÉRO.

He avoided a girl with fierce, determined eyes, wearing a tight black blouse on top of sausage slacks of green material through which her buttocks were straining for their independence, who came up to him with a Polaroid camera offering to take his picture instantly against the rainbow made by the fountain spray. He climbed some more broad steps and was suddenly in a crowd of children roller-skating intricate patterns all over and around each other. Watching them, he felt a smile ease itself across his face as he saw an old man, his hair white and his remaining teeth yellow and brown with age and tobacco, glide with smooth vigor in an outer circle that enclosed all the children whose presence seemed in no way at all to bother the ancient man. And unlike the children, to whom this skating seemed a serious enough business, the old man was amazingly relaxed, smiling for the benefit of no one but his own self, clasping his hands behind him, placing them on top of his head, or holding them out

sideways to steady his glide just when and how the interior spirit moved him. He looked briefly in Baako's direction once as he passed, and Baako looked up and away from him in embarrassment, yet immediately it seemed to him the old man had winked at him in his passage. In their flight Baako's eyes had risen till they came to an inscription high above the crowd below. He would not have read the words if he had not needed to reassure the old skater that he was not staring; but the message up there took his attention, so that he had no need of pretense any more:

TOUT HOMME CRÉE SANS LE SAVOIR
COMME IL RESPIRE
MAIS L'ARTISTE SE SENT CRÉER
SON ACTE ENGAGE TOUT SON ÊTRE
SA PEINE BIEN AIMÉE LE FORTIFIE.

When he climbed up to the central space and crossed over to the other side, he read another inscription on the opposite wall, but could not remember it afterward. The weak feeling was already coming. It was not a feeling of straightforward disgust. There was nothing outside that he had seen to raise in him such a feeling. And within himself what he was aware of was vague: an unpleasant but not at all sharp sensation that everything he had done in about the last half year had been intended as a postponement, a pushing away of things to which he felt necessarily called. On the way back to his hotel he did not go the way he had come, but turned right along the road before the tower, then left along the shaded avenue that bore the sign

AVENUE DE SUFFREN.

Not much traffic passed — a few shiny cars in the soft darkness made by the trees — and he himself overtook a North African alone, pushing little bits of paper in water flowing along the flat gutter with a broom of twigs. When he stepped into the hotel entrance the keeper looked at him and told him he looked ill. He nodded and asked if he could call the airline on the telephone. He was up in his room, lying flat on his back when the call came. He took it.

"*Parlez, monsieur,*" the keeper said.

"Invalides?" he asked.

"*Oui, j'écoute,*" a woman answered.

"Madame, do you speak English?"

"Yes, I do."

"Good. I'm an Air France stopover passenger. I'd like to change my flight date."

"What is the actual date on your ticket?"

"Next Tuesday."

"You want a change to . . . ?"

"The earliest flight to Accra."

"Today?"

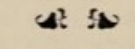
"Is that possible?"

"Yes. But you will have to be quick. There is a flight at sixteen forty-five. Air Afrique. You can take the fifteen-fifteen bus at the Invalides."

"Thank you, madame."

"May I have your name?"

"Oh yes, yes . . ."



About an hour after dinner Brempong came back to sit beside Baako. He had been walking up and down the plane with a sort of proprietary familiarity and confidence, obliging stewardesses to squeeze past him, trying available services and asking to buy tax-free tobacco and drinks.

"I like plane travel," he said gratuitously. Baako said nothing. "But it's a pity," Brempong continued, "that you can't take heavy goods in a plane. The nicest things I bought will have to get home by sea. I've insured everything, though, but still. You know, for my mother I bought a complete freezer."

"A what?"

"A deep refrigeration plant, commercial model. It ought to be delivered before Christmas. It's a surprise. My mother has always wanted to have a whole bull slaughtered in her yard for Christmas. Now I'll buy the bull and what remains won't decay."

"I see."

"It's no use," Brempong said, "going back with nothing. You may not have the chance to travel again in a long time. It's a big opportunity, and those at home must benefit from it too. I don't see the sense in returning with nothing. But you haven't had much experience." The voice of a hostess rose softly under Brempong's and finally replaced it: "Ladies and gentlemen, in two minutes we'll be over the oasis of El

Oued. Our altitude now is 22,000 feet. Our speed is 682 miles per hour."

Baako looked through the window, searching for the oasis beneath the carpet of clouds. The noise of the engines seemed to swell as he looked downward. When he turned from the window he saw his companion standing up, and out in front there was once more the restless wigged head.

"I must go," Brempong said. Baako leaned forward in a slight bow. When Brempong disappeared down the aisle, he looked down again. The oasis had long since disappeared, and where it was still possible to see the desert its brown expanse was showing fewer and fewer splashes of yellow now. A section of the plane's wing lowered slightly, and an adjacent piece rose just as slightly as the plane made a small turn. Orange dusk sunlight flashed directly into Baako's eyes, then vanished as the plane took a steadier course. Baako let his head lean against the window, but immediately jerked away from the cold contact. He pulled the little curtain of gray and light brown woven tissue across the frozen pane, rested his head upon it, turned out the overhead light and deliberately closed his eyes; but still he felt uncomfortable. His head had not found an angle that could hold it. With his eyes still closed he pressed the armrest lever and let his seat fall back as far as it would go, his head and body falling back with it. Listening in the deepening darkness inside his head, he was able to make out of the noise of the plane's engine patterns that crossed into each other and untangled themselves again — not the undifferentiated whine first heard, but several beats, separate rhythms coming together

— and still listening to the sounds he lost awareness of the movement of the machine he was in.

". . . WISH TO INFORM YOU THAT WE WILL BE LANDING IN A FEW MOMENTS AT ACCRA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT WHERE THE OUTSIDE TEMPERATURE IS 75 DEGREES FAHRENHEIT. WILL YOU PLEASE STRAIGHTEN THE BACKS OF YOUR SEATS, REFRAIN FROM SMOKING AND CHECK THAT YOUR SEAT BELTS ARE PROPERLY FASTENED."

This voice too had the sugary amplified softness, but it had awakened Baako with a feeling of anxiety that would not go away. He tried to relax, staying in his seat and looking out into the darkness below. At first he could see nothing but the night void, but gradually little shaky points of light appeared, turning into weak firefly clusters that became denser every moment. A red light, marking perhaps some high tower, appeared, then after a while a couple of blue lights, and finally the slowly pulsing shaft of strong green light as the plane circled for its descent.

Again Baako waited till the first hurrying people had gone down, then he got up, took his typewriter down and went toward the plane exit. Brempong and his wife were not very far ahead of him. Above the intervening heads he could see the top of the woman's wig, and from time to time the man's back appeared through a momentary gap. At the bottom of the stairs a stewardess asked Baako if he was a transit passenger, and when he said no she took his ticket and tore off a detachable slip from it and said goodbye to him with a lingering smile. He smiled back. Yards away a Ghana Airways bus pulled up and stopped, and the first of the passengers began to climb into it. Baako was surprised to see

Brempong raise an arm and wave heroically toward the darkness in front of him before getting into the bus. Only after the bus had brought them to the terminal did Baako understand: behind the lining fence there was a waiting crowd, and several Akan voices had shouted when Brempong's shoes hit the tarmac, "There he comes!" One voice had screamed, "Uncle H.R.H.!" from the darkness, and Brempong had waved once more before he too entered the customs area.

Waiting for his suitcase and his guitar, Baako watched three Ghanaians in suits come in, each holding a sheaf of papers and looking earnestly into the crowd of passengers. One of them relaxed a moment and smiled on seeing Brempong.

"Hello, *Akora*, welcome back," he shouted. "Are your people meeting you?"

"Oh yes, *Akora*, oh yes," Brempong said.

"Good. I have to meet some experts for the Ministry. Expatriates."

"Right ho, *Akora!*"

Brempong's friend moved toward a group of white faces, his teeth already bared in a preparatory welcome smile. The other two made for their own experts.

A tall young man in an open-necked white shirt came in and went directly to Brempong and his wife.

"Ah, there you are, Mensah," Brempong said when he saw him. "They sent you to meet me?"

"Yes sir," the young man said. There were beads of perspiration on his nose. "I'm sorry I'm late, but the police guard wouldn't let me in."

"Why didn't you show him your papers? Didn't they give you any?"

"He was an escort, sir. He asked if I was coming like this to meet a white man. I said no, a Ghanaian. He curled his top lip and just stopped me."

"These escorts are idiots. You should have told him you were meeting a white man."

"I was thinking of that. But a General Police sergeant came and when I showed him the papers he told the escort they were for a very very big man. So I came immediately."

Brempong chuckled and looked at his wife.

"The fools!" the woman said.

"About your luggage, sir," the young man continued, "I have given all necessary instructions. We can go to the arrivals lobby and wait. I think your family is waiting for you there."

"That's right," Brempong laughed happily. "Let's go, Genie." Mrs. Brempong gave most of her gift packages to the young man and the three walked toward the door opposite. Near the door, Brempong wheeled suddenly and called to Baako with perfunctory cheer, "Need any help?"

"No, thanks," Baako said.

His luggage arrived sooner than he had expected, the guitar first, separated from the suitcase by two trunks and a traveling bag. He picked them up and when he came to the customs line the inspector looked briefly into his suitcase, frowned quizzically and asked, "Paper, paper, is that all?"

"That's all," Baako answered, picking up the chalked guitar and suitcase.

A strange scene greeted him as he strode into the arrivals lounge. Three tough-looking men in white jumpers with their cloths balled around their waists were holding Brempong high above their heads. Around them a large crowd of the hero's relatives struggled to get closer to him, shouting, some singing in an ecstatic, emotional confusion.

"Eeeeei! Our white man, we saw you wave! We saw you!"

"The big man has come again."

"Oh, they have made you a white man."

"Complete!"

"And you have come back to us, your own. Thank God."

"Yes, praise him!"

A woman, very fat but still youthful and vigorous, pierced the circle of admirers from outside and shoved her way with demonic energy into the center, shouting with a power that raised her message above the general jubilant cacophony.

"Set him down. Give him to me. Let me embrace him, my precious brother. Hei, hei, let him see his sister, me." The welcomers parted easily before the fat woman's cannonball thrust, their confusion heightening the eye-filling impression of an unending swirl of colored cloth and jewelry. The three men allowed Brempong's feet to touch the floor, and the fat woman bounded onto him in a great leap that threw him back against his stalwart carriers.

"Oooooh my own brother!" she screamed, caught in an orgasmic shudder. "You have come, you have come again to me!"

"Take it easy, Sissie," Brempong said. The fat woman shifted her bulk in a little grotesque dance, her *kente* blouse flapping its elephant-ear sleeves in a whirl of color, her teeth flashing and her blubbery buttocks quivering as she turned and turned in the center around her returning brother.

Weeping freely in her joy, looking with insatiate gladness at the traveler just arrived, she wiped her tears and moved with all the crowd out into the night air, shouting, "The champagne! The champagne! Bring the champagne!"

Feeling a steady tension in his groin, Baako asked a policeman on guard if he could look after his luggage, then went through an entrance marked GENTLEMEN. The air inside was uncomfortable with a genital moistness more organic than the sharp smell of urine alone, and he looked up expecting to find the windows shut. They were almost all open. He forced his own urine out in a hurried stream down the yellowed porcelain and quickly emerged out of the fetid air. The policeman gaped in disappointment at him as he thanked him and picked up his luggage and made for the nearest exit. Outside, looking for taxi lights, he walked toward a blinking fluorescent brilliance and found it was no taxi but a large advertising glass box which every few seconds beamed out the message:

STATE EXPRESS 555
STATE EXPRESS 555
STATE EXPRESS 555.

When he drew nearer he saw the main sign was not alone. Smaller letters above it flashed the simultaneous exhortation

Get the taste

And below the slogan was extended:

Get the taste
of international success,
the smooth exquisite flavor
of a high class cigarette.
Get the taste.

Nearby the momentary silence was broken by a sudden pop, and the many voices of Brempong's welcoming crowd resumed their excited chatter. The headlights of cars now entering the area once more lit their smiling faces and the riot of blue and green and red and yellow and black and deep gold and purple in the different *kente* cloths out there.

"Give it to me, then!" the fat sister's voice rose again, and the bottle was passed overhead till it reached her in the center. A lone voice gasped audibly, in spite of the spirit of the moment, that this was a lot of expensive drink to waste this way. But the fat sister laughed and shouted, "Kai! Who calls it a waste, that I should bathe our been-to's feet in the best there is? Kai!" And now Baako saw Brempong smile and say easily, "Oh, don't worry." The fat sister leaped with her bulk a few inches in the air, shouting, "You heard that? Poweeeer! More beyond!" Then she bent down and poured the drink out over Brempong's shoes while murmurs of approbation broke out of the admiring circle. Several voices echoed the words "More beyond!" and the sister laughed a long, abandoned happy laugh which set the onlooking Baako's ears singing with the remembered wailing laughter of Afro-Americans beginning a sad South American carnival song about a hungry dove lost in love.

"Now where's the official car?" a voice asked impatiently.

"Hei, driver, the car!"

"So where has the driver gone now?"

The tall young man who had come to meet Brempong answered this last question: "He's waiting for us. In the VIP car park." But this produced an unmollified response.

"Still? Doesn't he know the big man is waiting? Ah, the insolence of these drivers!"

"Hei driver!" Several claps. "Driveeeeer!"

Baako found himself quite close to Brempong, and the other recognized him.

"Are you sure you don't need a lift?" Brempong asked him.

"I'm quite all right, really," Baako said. "Thank you."

"Who is that?" the fat sister asked Brempong.

"A friend. I came with him on the plane."

"You mean he is also a been-to?" she asked, inspecting Baako with suspicious thoroughness, from head to toe. "I must say he doesn't . . ."

"By the way," Brempong said quickly, cutting the fat one short, "let me give you my card." He took out a wallet from his inside breast pocket and extracted a card from it. The leather was green, embroidered with a gold leaf pattern that seemed to resolve itself into a monogram in the flash of the cigarette ad light. Baako took the card.

"Moroccan," Brempong smiled as he closed his wallet carefully and inserted it back in his pocket.

The long shape of a limousine detached itself from the row of guarded vehicles parked deep beyond the ordinary cars, its turning headlights catching the luminous letters of the sign at the special entrance:

V.I.P. CAR PARK
NO ENTRY
By order

As the big black car slowed to a purring stop, Brempong's welcomers started a soft stampede to get to it, but the fat woman stopped it.

"Move back, you villagers," she said, pushing hard against those in her way. "Don't come and kill him with your TB. He has just returned, and if you don't know, let me tell you. The air where he has been is pure, not like ours. Give him space. Let him breathe!" She pushed till she had created some space around the hero. An old woman ventured into the space and began to ask a question: "But how shall we . . ." But the fat woman drove her back into the crowd, then whirled around, stripping off her large *kente* stole in a movement of unexpected swiftness. She laid the glittering cloth on the asphalt leading to the back door of the limousine and called out, "Come, my been-to; come, my brother. Walk on the best. Wipe your feet on it. Yes it's *kente*, and it's yours to tread on. Big man, come!"

Brempong let her lead him over the rich cloth, nodding and smiling as she yelled repeatedly to him, "Stamp on it, yes, great man, walk!"

Apart from the fat woman, two more people, a man and a woman, both in *kente*, got in the back with Brempong. The tall young man shut the door after them and got in front beside the driver. The old woman who had been pushed out of the way passed in front of Baako, muttering, "Ei, ei! This is some disease that has descended upon us. My last cedi, and I must spend it at this time, because I was mad enough to agree to come and welcome someone's swollen peacock." Behind her the car horn gave a sudden violent blast. She staggered sideways, and inches beside her, like a slow, fat worm the car slid past toward the road out. The light inside it was on, and it seemed to Baako as if the back of it was filled entirely with color, laughter, teeth and light. Just as it turned left onto the road, the big band brake lights went on behind it, and its number plate shone clearly:

GV 109.

Baako followed the beaten old woman, catching up with her before she reached the taxi ranks. He was thinking of what to say to her when she spoke first.

"*Owura*," she said. "I am going to Adabraka. Asylum Down. If you are going that way, perhaps it will not be hard if I come with you?"

"I think I will go the same way."

"I thank you very much, *Owura*. You have saved me."

One taxi driver put out his roof light when Baako approached and said, "No, I'm waiting for someone in there." A second switched off his light and slowly rolled up his window, saying nothing at all. The third man Baako came to got out and came toward him.

"Taxi?"

"Yes."

The driver put the suitcase in the taxi trunk while Baako let the old woman in and sat beside her in the back. In a moment the on-off glow of the big cigarette advertisement had disappeared behind the accelerating car. A few yards from the junction with the main road into town a sign held overhead on thick white pillars proclaimed:

WELLCOME!

At the junction itself, while the driver waited for three slow incoming cars to pass, Baako read the words of a smaller sign saying goodbye to departing travelers about to use the Ghana International Airport. The ride in was smooth, and the brightness of the main road lighting had about it an element of newness that was heightened as the taxi got nearer the center. Large, new buildings slid unhurriedly by. Baako

asked the driver what they were and in answer got a small flow of strangely casual answers: "That one? Trade Union Congress. Labor Office. Farmers' Secretariat. Tax."

"They are all lit."

"Sure. Every night," the taxi driver said.

"Why?"

"Why not?" The driver chuckled. "Show beez. Is beautiful, not so?"

"You think so?"

The driver shrugged and did not answer.

Baako felt something else rising in him to add itself to that feeling of isolation and unease from which he had thought he was fleeing. He found it very hard trying to force the feeling into thought that he could grasp, and yet it was there, like a very strong pulse that gained in the potency of its beat with the awareness of every new event and every new thing that had passed outside. His own departure was far away and hazy in his memory now, except for an overriding sense that too much of it had been a matter of the outward show. He was unsure now why there was in him this dread of his being somehow forced into a repetition of things with no meaning for his own life, until he thought again of Brempong and the family that had come so lovingly to welcome him. A sharp pain pricked his left temple. He winced and did not open his eyes. Laying his head far back on the seat, he saw the darkness inside his head filling with the sweating, smiling, suited figure of Brempong, caught happily in the center of his crowd like a man who had looked forward so long to just

some such beautiful sort of trap. For a moment he thought perhaps they all knew, Brempong and the crowd, that what they had just done would be a brief ceremony, to be forgotten so that the returned traveler could return to life in a way that would not make it all a long continuation of a desperate inflated game that had forcibly to stay different, much larger than any possible real life here could be. It was not just in his frightened imagination. He had seen this first thing: an invitation into a pretended world, happily given, happily taken, so completely accepted that there had hardly been any of the pretenders to whom it could have seemed unreal. What power would Brempong find to sustain such a dizzy game? Or perhaps he had found as much of this power as was necessary. After all, the crowd around him had been just as willing to raise him skyward as he had been willing to let himself be lifted. Perhaps he was not likely to be worried about the power needed for this game, because like all the eager ones around him he had found in the game itself an easy potency he had not had to struggle for, to create. In spite of himself, Baako found a kind of fearful wonder invading him. A man had gone away, spent time elsewhere, grown months and years, and then returned. Those he had left behind had spent time too, grown along their different waves, waiting to welcome their traveler. In the end they had come waiting for him with a ceremony in their hearts, and amazingly it had happened that whatever strange ceremony he had been rehearsing inside his own being had been a perfect answer to theirs. Amazing, since these had been no mere laid-down ceremonies, but things growing with an obvious, wild freedom right here and now. Now Baako could feel his

own fear more sharply. It was not something he could explain, not now. But there was in his flight something of an impotent resentment whose absence accounted for at least a large part of Brempong's happy abandon. And there was no question of his joining Brempong's happy world. It was not just the feeling that he would be destroyed in it, explode from something within; even if he had felt like it, he was sure there was a wall between him and Brempong. Maybe the man could see something he was blind to, or maybe he had eyes denied the exhilarated Brempong. At any rate, he would need to be the careful one.

It was not a mere game. Not to the welcomers he had seen this night. More insistently, Baako saw the ceremony working itself out: the straining crowd, the clothes, the jewels, the cascading drink, the worship of this new chief, the car, the words in the night. Did it matter whether there was real power or real joy as long as the human beings involved thought there was? So what if these words and ceremonies were the mere outward show of power and joy hiding impotence? Who was going to stand outside it all and say maybe the show was designed to hide impotence, but all it did was steep this powerlessness in a worsening stupidity? And who would stop laughing and praise-singing long enough to hear such words?

"*Owura*," a distant voice said. Baako opened his eyes.

"*Owura krakye*," the old woman next to him was saying, with a voice diminished as if in awe, "if it pleases you, we are approaching the neighborhood where I live."

"Oh, just tell the driver when we're there," Baako said.

The taxi had turned off the bright main road and was going much more slowly now.

"There, at the Cathedral roundabout, after the craze-house," the old woman said, pointing ahead.

The driver stopped immediately after the circle, let the old woman out and moved off again before she had finished saying her long thanks.

"Where are we going?" the driver asked. "Where is your home?"

"I was just thinking . . ." Baako said. "Are there any hotels around now?"

"The new ones are behind us. Star, Continental, Ambassador. But in this area there are the same old ones. Avenida, Ringway. They say the Avenida is fine." The driver idled his machine. "I thought you had a home in this town. Or don't you know anybody? A friend?"

"Oh, I don't think you'll know any of my friends."

"Try. Man never knows."

"O.K. Do you know where Fifi Williams lives?"

The driver laughed loud and long. "Never say die!"

"Why, do you know?"

"No. But everybody knows him. Ghana Bank, not so?"

"Yes."

"Young been-to. He must be at the Star now. He's a real guy. Swinging nigger."

"A what?"

"Swinging nigger. You don't know the latest terms here," the taxi driver said. "Swinging nigger. That means a tough guy. Plenty of good time."

"I see."

"No, I don't know his bungalow," the driver repeated, still coasting.

"Let's go to the Avenida, then."

"Fine."

The car picked up speed, its lights making the low gutter culverts flash yellow as it left intersections behind, then turned left and followed the slow curve of a gravel drive and stopped before the Avenida Hotel.

"Eighty pesewas," the driver said after he had put the suitcase on the hotel veranda.

"Will you take a dollar? I haven't changed my money."

"Sure."

The taxi drove off over the gravel and back out onto the road outside, its back fenders a dark orange color in the red glow of the tail lights. In the small hotel lobby also the light was a shaded amber, and the clerk behind the polished mahogany table looked more than half asleep. He told Baako the only rooms left were in the annex, and when Baako nodded he filled out a form and asked him to pay the price in advance.

"I have only travelers' checks," Baako said.

"They're all right."

"How much?"

"Nine cedis. Nine dollars," the clerk said, not looking up.

Baako signed a ten-dollar travelers' check and the clerk gave him back a note that had a dark turquoise color.

"One new cedi," he said with a tired sigh, rising and coming round his table. "Follow me. We'll go to the annex."

Baako followed the clerk down the driveway, across the road, down a small side street and then right along a wide, sandy alley. At their approach a lean dog began howling like a frightened beast and hopped off on three legs, making for deeper shadow. It continued its howling as the clerk stopped in front of a big two-story building, opened the gate and said, "Here." He led the way up the cement stairs, raising the suitcase above his head till he came to the top, went straight along an unlit corridor almost to the end and stopped before an unmarked door. He opened it and switched on a lamp beside a low bed.

"The bathroom and lavatory are here," he said as he walked out, pointing with his thumb. "Breakfast is at eight, in the main hotel dining room."

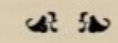
"Thank you," Baako said.

When the clerk's steps were no longer audible Baako lay on his back upon the bed, looking at the bare ceiling. Occasionally the muffled sound of a motor passing along the road outside rose softly and died down, like a sea wave. The air inside smelled humid and stale. Baako got up and went to the window. An air-conditioner was fixed directly under it, but it was not working. He opened the window as far as it would go, but he did not feel any immediate inrush of air. Instead, the howling noises made by the dog rose again, stopped briefly and continued. He went out to the end of the corridor, trying to make up his mind about a shower. But inside the bathroom the light socket had no bulb in it, and he came back and sat on the bed. Now he felt an ambiguous comfort, savoring this sense of being so alone back home, connected for the moment to no one, with no one save himself knowing where he was. Wondering why he did not have more of a feeling of being lost, he took off his clothes and left them on the chair and table beside the bed. Going back to the bed, he stopped, opened the guitar case and took out the instrument. The student from whom he had bought it had talked a long time to him when he had gone to get it, starting with the information that he wouldn't always need a tuning fork: he could pick up a telephone and listen to the dial tone, and it would give him an exact B flat sound, a fret down on the fifth string. His Parthian shot had been to tell Baako that his wanting a guitar meant he had begun to run from human beings. "That thing is going to be your companion, all you need," he had said, scratching his thin neck. "It even has a female shape, a bit stylized I admit, plus a goddam hole big enough for the mythical African prick." And then the fellow had counted the money Baako paid him very carefully to make sure he was not being cheated.

His left fingers curved and placed themselves automatically for an E chord, but before he could begin picking, the theatricality of all these gestures he had made came nauseatingly to him, and he rose to put the guitar away and got into the bed. There was no second sheet, but he did not find the feel of the blanket irritating. He was thinking and wondering whether there were any people here who had escaped the roles held out to them by the powerless hopers close to them. He would have to be careful. Unless those near him could want him not playing roles, but as his own changing self: impotent sometimes, growing, sometimes strong, confused, often weak, changing, many things by turns.

Under him the sheet felt moist, but between it and the

covering blanket there was warmth. Outside, the dog raised its voice in an unbelievably long howl which did not stop but became a yelping sound and then a whimper growing always fainter as the dog and the sky seen through the window and the sound of passing cars dissolved into the wider quietness around.



In the morning he woke up and went immediately to the bathroom. There was a soft diffused light entering through a side window, and for his shower he found a small cake of green soap and a white towel, old and very dry in a stringy way. He walked over to the main hotel building and found the night clerk's place behind the mahogany table taken by a young girl with violet lips and a wig of light brown hair. Behind her a small wall clock indicated it was twenty past ten. The girl was in the middle of a telephone conversation.

"I came last night," Baako told her. "What time do I have to move out?"

The girl let a slow laugh end itself before she covered the mouthpiece and said with obvious irritation, "Twelve." Her side of the conversation seemed to consist entirely of laughter and gentle ejaculations that could have meant either surprise, admiration or both.

"I'd like to make a call after you," Baako cut in, and waited. She seemed not so much to be ignoring him now as to have completely lost all awareness of his presence. When the time read ten-thirty, Baako walked out to the road again and stopped the first taxi he saw.

"Ghana Bank," he said.
"High Street?" the driver asked.
"Is that the central office?"
"The biggest."
"Good," Baako said. "That should be it."

The ride was short. The driver gave Baako two large coins in exchange for the dollar he gave him and let him out. To his right he saw a small, shaded space overflowing with tough-looking children carrying crates of colored Biro pens and fighting over the few buyers there, and women in a crooked row selling identical lots of fruit and cakes and bread, then beggars sprawled haphazardly in what spaces they could find in the press. The Bank was to the left, on the other side of a large car park. Sunlight shot sharply back off rows of parked cars that seemed all new and freshly polished, and beyond them it bathed the gold-leaf grille of the building's facade in a surfeit of brightness. At intervals along the shiny cagework medallions bore all the ancient symbols in sculpted relief: twin pods of cocoa, sets of Ashanti gold weights, the complete line of spokesmen's staffs for the seven Akan clans, the swords of the old royal executioners crossed ceremonially, stools, elephants and palm trees, a heavy fold of *kente*, *akwaaba* dolls with their mocking, innocent faces, and above all the repeated figure of the protean spider Ananse, always in a different position along the turns and the radiating lines of his web.

A young clerk in a white shirt and striped blue tie took him to a side entrance, up two flights in a lift so new it still smelled of paint and cement, and stepped out to show him the way along a shaded corridor.

"His door is Number Three," he said.

"Thank you."

A loud, hearty voice answered when he knocked, and he went in. For a small moment Baako was not sure. The sound of an air conditioner reached him simultaneously with the blast of cold air. There was a man behind the big desk opposite him, talking relaxedly to a woman whose back and wig were the only things visible to Baako at first. The man got up, and Baako relaxed. He did not really look entirely like Brempong.

"Christ almighty . . . Baako!"

"Hi, Fifi," Baako said, shaking hands.

"Ei, Baako!" Fifi shouted. "When did you come?"

"Last night."

"But why, man, why didn't you let me know? Your mother said you would stay in Europe a bit and come next month."

"I changed my mind."

"Ei, Baako. You're now an American," Fifi said, looking at him from head to toe. "A thin American." The woman laughed, and Fifi turned abruptly to her: "Oh, look, Christina, pardon me, but this is Aunt Efua's son, Baako."

"The one who was in America?" the woman asked. A smile spread upward from her lips, animating her eyes.

"Aunt Efua has only one son," Fifi said, laughing.

"Oh Feef," she protested with a tired, feminine languor, "you're such a bad man." Then she held out a small hand and in the same tone said to Baako, "Welcome home, been-to stranger."

The woman had an unmistakably seductive air about her.

When she spoke, she drew the words out as if she herself were deep inside a dream from which she was reluctant to emerge, so that every syllable fell from her lips with the softness of something lubricated with a sensuous and delicious fatigue. No movement of hers was quick. Even the closing and opening of her eyelids was done as if any normal speed would cancel the pleasure she got from them.

"Have you seen your mother yet?" Fifi asked.

"No," Baako said. "You know, I don't know where she lives now."

"You don't know her house number?" Fifi asked, absently; then he added: "What am I talking about. They haven't numbered the houses in Accra yet. Not properly."

"But they will soon," Christina said, "in the year two thousand *kojo* ten." She sighed a long sigh. "Well, Feef, I have to go now."

"When can I see you again?" Fifi asked her.

Christina chuckled lazily. "You know it depends on you," she sang deliberately, eyes closed, "and your holy wife who won't let you come and play . . . and your beautiful car which she wants to monopolize . . . and your money which she wants for herself alone, and your sweet *kojo* magic which she can't share at all. But as for me, Feef, I'm ready any time."

"Saturday?"

"I'll believe you when I see your handsome face, Feef."

"We can meet at the Star."

"And don't forget . . ."

"I'll let you have it, I promise."

"A promise is a promise is a promise is a promise," she said,

getting up to go. The air around her was now softly filled with a sweet suspicion of powder and sweat, perfume and sex. "Oh, by the way," she said at the door, "if you can't escape, send the new been-to to see me. I hope he brought his car." The door closed behind her.

"Who is she?" Baako asked.

"Christina . . ." Fifi laughed uneasily, "just one of the girls."

"Man," Baako said softly, laughing back.

"There'll be dozens like her after you the moment they smell you out. You heard her saying it; the new been-to."

"They'll run backward then when they see I have no car."

Fifi's eyes narrowed in surprise. "It's coming by sea?"

"What's coming?" Baako asked.

"Your car," Fifi answered in a patient tone.

"I haven't got one."

"I see." Fifi looked embarrassed. He hummed a nonsensical snatch and motioned to Baako to sit in the chair left by the woman Christina. "Let me try and get your mother on the phone."

The call took some time. It seemed it was not a simple affair, but that the receptionist had to be joked with and promised things before she finally agreed to make the connection for the laughing Fifi.

"Hello, hello, hello? May I speak to Mrs. Onipa? Ah, Aunt Efua, I have a huge present waiting here for you . . . No . . . No . . . No, it speaks and breathes . . . Oh no hahahaha . . . No . . . No, I'll tell you . . . No, hohohohoho Aunt Efua, you're as bad as I am now. Look, take a deep breath and close your eyes . . . That's right. Now count . . . Ready? Baako is here . . . Now . . . In this office . . . I swear . . . Would

I joke with something like this? I'm serious. You can speak to him. All right, I agree . . . And if I'm right, what will you give me? Agreed . . . Agreed. Don't go anywhere. Bye." Fifi sighed and shook his head, putting back the handset. "She's afraid I'm joking. Her voice was shaking, I don't blame her. But why didn't you send her a cable, Baako, why? You're so strange."

Down in the car park an old guard opened the door for Fifi and maintained a humble half-crouch till he got in and pulled it shut. Baako went round the front of the car to the other side. It was a white Mustang, its glittering chrome racehorse symbol bent with compact power and speed and shimmering in the sun as Baako passed it. Fifi drove to the hotel first to pick up the luggage, then sped with confident ease through the center of the town and came to a stop before a large, luridly painted sign:

RADIANTWAY INTERNATIONAL DAY NURSERY.

There was an accompanying picture, a crude thing in clear colors, of a little boy and girl, both African but very light-skinned, standing facing a long flight of steps topped by a brilliant rising sun.

A bright start now
To a successful future.
Write to The Head Teacher,
Radiantway,
P.O. Box 0712,
Accra.

"Here we are," Fifi said. He led the way across the open

gutter into an office facing the street. From somewhere in the yard within came the high voices of children singing in unison:

> Jaaack and Jill
> Went aaap the hill
> To fetch a pail of waaatah . . .

"Ah, Mr. Williams," said a gray-haired man, rising from his desk, "glad to see you here. Is it one of your little relatives . . .?"

"No, Principal," Fifi said, and Baako saw the old man smile a smile full of pleasure at the mention of the title, "not this time. I rang Mrs. Onipa about half an hour ago. She's expecting me."

"Oh yes," the old man said. "One moment, Mr. Williams." He walked toward an open door in the back leading to the yard.

There was a sharp rap on the door before the old man reached it and then Baako saw his mother. She had entered quietly, almost timidly, but the moment she saw him it seemed as if some potent force had filled her and made her forget all else around; she gave him no time to move — with a soundless leap she threw herself against him, and he felt her whole body quivering as he too held her close, her head slightly bowed and resting against his chest. Then she pulled away a pace and stared upward into his eyes. Her eyes were wet and red now, and when she began to speak her emotion made her lips work against her words, so that she had to stop after nearly every word.

"Oh, Baako," she said, trying to smile through her tears,

"you came so suddenly. You didn't give us time to get ready for you."

"It's all right, Efua," Baako said. "I changed my plans."

"Aaaaaahaaa," the old man was nodding, "this is the son, then?"

Baako saw his mother's face as she tried without success to frame more words before collapsing once more against him, trembling and sobbing. It was Fifi who spoke to the gray-haired man. "Principal, I forgot to make the introduction. This is Baako." Baako shook hands and the old man said, "Pleased to meet you," before turning to his mother with a broad smile. "It's a blessed day for you, Mrs. Onipa. Take the afternoon off to give him a fitting welcome."

"Thank you, Principal, thank you," she said.

He caught his mother's face from time to time when he looked in Fifi's rearview mirror and saw her sitting in one corner of the back seat. She was smiling now, completely at ease in the enfolding luxury of the red leather upholstery. Once she tried suddenly to wave to some vanishing person along the way, and when she steadied herself again she had a smile of joy and final triumph on her lips. In a moment she was leaning forward all the way to touch his left ear and cheek, and she was asking in a near-whisper filled with wonder and gladness, "When is yours coming, Baako?"

"What?" he asked, surprised.

"Yours, your car, so that my old bones can also rest." But before Baako could find an answer Fifi had raced his engine to a noisy stop and was saying in a too joyful voice, "Auntie, we're home!"

4 : Awo

It was a sudden cry, long and full of fear, followed by the feeble plop of a soft fall. There was no one else in the house at this time in the morning, save Araba and Naana. Quickly, he took a shirt off a peg behind the door and rushed out across the central hall. But his grandmother was ahead of him, just on the point of turning the corner towards Araba's room, though she was walking at her usual slow, blind pace. She heard him coming and, as if she had felt a need to explain her own uncanny speed, turned to him and said, "Blood, Baako, I smelled blood."

"Go back, Naana," he said, holding her arm. "Go back to your room and rest. I will go and see what made Araba cry out."

"It is the baby; I smelled blood," Naana said, her eyes staring and her closed mouth trembling with her fear. "But, Great Friend, this is such an early time for him to come, if he is to stay now."

"Go back, Naana. I will take care of her."

"I know," the old woman said, trying to smile, and turned to go back into her room. He moved swiftly past the two little storerooms to his left, along the narrow passageway.

The door to Araba's room was wide open, but from the outside only the foot of the double bed within was visible, together with the carefully arranged pyramid of trunks and suitcases, each covered with a separate pink coverlet edged with blue and yellow embroidery. The window was half shut, so that it took Baako a few moments after he had entered to see clearly what had happened. Araba was sitting in an exhausted position, her back leaning against the side of the bed and her legs spread apart in front of her. She was staring up and straight ahead, and when Baako entered she did not seem to have enough energy to turn her head and look at him. There was blood on the uneven cement floor underneath her, filling a small hollow and beginning to flow over in a small stream running between her thighs. Apart from the blood, there was nothing else.

"Relax, Araba," Baako said. Holding her around the back with his left, he slipped his right arm under her thighs and lifted her off the floor and onto the bed. She held his left wrist in a strong grip, and her eyes now had in them the uncertain look of panic.

"Relax," he said again. "I must go out and get a taxi, and we'll go to the hospital."

"Call Kwesi," she said weakly.

"Later," he answered. "Tema is a long way, and we have to get to the hospital first. Don't worry, I'll be with you." She smiled a little, but still kept hold of him, so that he had to disengage himself gently and reassure her again before going out.

He ran out into the yard, past the gate, turning right as he came to the street. He kept running till he reached the Link

Road junction with the street. In several minutes only one car passed that way, a gray Mercedes with some plump-cheeked official in the back of it. He ran faster, all the way down to the Kaneshie market, to the big junction made by the Winneba and Link roads. An empty taxi appeared, slowing down as Baako raised his right hand. But just as the driver was about to come to a complete stop, his face took on a horrified look and he swerved sharply back into the stream of traffic on the left and was off. For one moment Baako wondered what could have been the matter; then he raised his hand to flag down a second coming taxi and he smiled: his right hand was smeared with blood. He let it fall to his side and used his left instead. The second taxi stopped very close to him. The driver gave two happy, relaxed toots on the horn.

"Get in, brother. Anywhere in Ghana, ready to go!" he said, turning to look at his passenger.

"First we go up Link Road, toward the little power substation."

"Yeaaah, Jack, I'm with you."

"After that we turn left. I'll point out the way."

"Finety!" the driver said. He made a sharp U turn and raced up the Link Road hill. He had a car radio, turned on not too loud, so that he could sing along with the bands as they played their high life tunes. He had a good clear voice, and he plainly enjoyed singing the words, as if all of them had in some way come out of himself and the life he led.

So many days I ask myself
the sum of this my life
what will it be?
Ninety tangled threads I have
to unravel to make this my life
and all I have to help me
is the darkness about me, ahhhh.

"We go left here," Baako said.

"Goodoh!" the driver said with enthusiasm, but almost immediately he slammed on his brakes and looked back at Baako. His eyes were glued to the bloody right hand.

"Hey, man, what is this? Did you kill a human being?"

"No," Baako answered. "It's my sister. She's ill — a baby coming."

"Aaah oooh, I see," the driver said. "I'll be quick, then." The car shot forward and came to a springy stop before the yard gate.

"Could you come and help me? She's inside."

"Oh sure." The driver stepped out and banged his door shut. "Don't close your side." The two entered the yard and the house, the driver whistling softly all the time. From Naana's room her voice came, disturbed and timid: "That is you, Baako, but who is the other?"

"A friend, Naana. Don't worry."

"If he is a helper, that is good."

"You took so long, Baako," Araba said. "I was afraid."

"Everything will be all right. I found a taxi." He took Araba in his arms, feeling her wet cloth under her, while the driver kept her head from falling back. They put her across the back seat of the taxi, and Baako sat in front with the driver, reaching back to hold her hand all the way to the hospital. The driver drove fast, and once he cut in across moving traffic so closely that Baako held his breath.

"Don't worry," the driver said. "I started driving when I was seventeen. Ten years, no accident. A baby, that's more serious than the police. Let them arrest me now. I'll ask them if they know the way inside their mothers — where they came from. No fear. A baby is number one." The dry gray expanse of salt flats left behind by the Korle Lagoon slipped rapidly by behind occasional mounds of greenery, and the driver passed every other vehicle. His radio was still on, and when a song pleased him he broke into it.

> Some were born so low
> flat down on their backs
> so cool night and bright morning
> they can see their god
> up there in his sky.
> Some were born on stilts
> placed on strong rooftops
> so where do you find the wonder
> that they don't take so long
> to look tall in this life?

The driver whistled with the guitar solo where it took over, and in places he even slipped in an extra wry note of his own. He took the turning to the hospital so sharply that his brakes shrieked, but in the back Araba was very quiet.

"This is the new maternity ward," the driver said when he came to a stop in front of a tall new concrete and glass structure. He called out to a passing nurse, "*Awuraa* Nurse," and the nurse came closer, squinting with ill humor, "there's a baby being born in this car."

"Are you the father?" the nurse asked, looking at Baako.

"No." He pointed to Araba in the back. "She's my sister."

"Are you a Senior Officer?"

"Look, I'm not in the Civil Service yet."

"Well," the nurse could hardly contain her disdain, "is the real husband a Senior Officer?"

"No," Baako said. "But why are you asking?"

"Look, beautiful *awuraa* Nurse," the driver said, winking broadly at the girl, "the woman is suffering."

"Taxi driver!" The nurse made the words come out like shots. "I am not speaking to you." The driver looked away and whistled the refrain of the last high life song he had been singing. "So what is your status?" she asked, turning to Baako again.

"I have no status," he said. He saw the nurse's brows rise and the corners of her lips fall.

"Well," she said. "This new wing is for VIP's and Senior Officers. The rest, to the old wards."

"And where are the old wards?"

"There!" The nurse pointed with perfunctory disdain, and swung off into the interior of the modern building.

"Ghana life sweet oh!" the driver shouted after the disappearing nurse. Then he turned to Baako and said reassuringly, "I know the old wards. Many times I took people there." He turned the car round and after a short ride he stopped in front of a ward where even from the outside Baako could see the mosquito gauze had turned green and the paint on the wood holding it had come off. "This place for broke people." The driver smiled.

"Araba," Baako said, "I'm going in to find a nurse. Everything will be all right. Wait for me." He smiled at her, but she did not make even the shadow of an attempt to smile.

The look of panic that had been in her face had disappeared. Now all he could see was a flat, hurt look. Her lips moved once, but he heard nothing distinct except something that sounded like *been-to*. He walked into the ward.

He found a nursing sister in blue uniform who walked briskly out with him when he told her his sister was bleeding; on the way out she shouted several times, "Issa, Issa, bring a wheelchair, quick!" Moments after they got to the taxi a bony man in khaki shorts and shirt with Frafra marks on his face joined them, pushing a dark green invalid's chair before him. The three men lifted Araba onto it and the one called Issa wheeled her into the ward.

"She's lost a lot of blood," the nurse said. "We'll be giving her a transfusion. Can you give blood? Our bank is very low."

"Yes," Baako answered. "Right now?"

"In a minute. I'll be where you found me."

The back seat of the taxi was wet with blood, but when Baako apologized, the driver shook his head. "Brother, it's only the blood of a new human being. Luck to you, luck to me." He took his fare and was visibly surprised when Baako gave him an extra cedi; then he recovered quickly and said thanks, adding, "You see, my luck is in already."

The blue nurse was fast and efficient. She had Baako wash his hands of Araba's blood and she herself supervised the taking of his blood before letting him go to the section where Araba had been taken.

"It's not visiting time, you know," she said without a smile, "but this is an emergency. Don't stay too long."

It was past eleven when he left the hospital. He walked down to the new VIP maternity wing, then turned along the road leading into town, looking for a bus. At the stop he did not go directly to take his place in the line of waiting people, but moved over to the large Municipal Transport Authority sign on which the official bus timetable had been printed. The sign indicated there would be a bus every seventh minute. When he went back to join the line the woman just ahead of him turned and smiled at him.

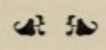
"You went to read the sign," she said, as if that statement itself carried a well-known message.

"Yes," he answered. The woman laughed. Half an hour later, when Baako left the queue to stop a taxi, the woman laughed again and asked him for a ride.

"Civil Service Commission," he told the driver.

"One cedi flat," the driver answered sullenly. The woman gaped, but said nothing.

"O.K. But hurry," Baako said. "I'm late."



The Junior Assistant to the Secretary of the Civil Service Commission sounded furious.

"You're very late. The appointment was for eleven."

"I had to take my sister to the hospital," Baako said. "She almost had a miscarriage."